

TODAY'S SCIENCE FICTION — TOMORROW'S FACT

STARTLING *stories*

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



Featuring

OVERDRIVE

A NOVELET BY

MURRAY LEINSTER



**FOR SUCCESS IN MODERN
BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY**

15

Dept. 1678, International Bridge
Engineering, LONDON, W.C2

THE BEST IN SCIENTIFICTION

Startling Stories

No. 14

New Zealand Edition

A Full-Length Novella

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Published in England by Frederator Ltd, Manchester Ltd, and distributed by World Distribution (Singapore) Ltd, Chichester House, Turner Street, Manchester, by arrangement with the publishers. (Industrious story) by John F. Friedman, Inc. 10 E. 4th St., New York, N.Y. 10003. (No Charge to the Membership) by Roger Dee, 1000 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10003. (Three-Legged Joe) by Jack Vance, 1000 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10003. (Who's Cribbing?) by Jack Lewis, 1000 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10003. Copyright, 1960, by John F. Friedman, Inc. Printed in England by C.T.P. Ltd, London, England. Names of all characters used in stories and short-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used it is a coincidence.



OVERDRIVE

I

THE space-tramp came out of overdrive again and began to let down to the surface of the planet below it. Its communicators sent a beamed request to land, the regular formality. There was no answer.

It descended steadily, repeating its identification and request, and adding that it had Earth-seeds, art-objects, heavy metals and dairy animals on

board for trading. There was still no reply.

It was surely the right planet. The sun was surely Precus. This was the second planet out from the local sun, Precus II. There were cities, on its surface, plainly visible through the electron telescope. But there was no reply to the beamed, formal message from the space-tramp.

He was one man against mutiny—

with only the secret of his skill

to match the weapons of the aliens. . .

Redd was gagged and bound with bed-clothing



a novelet by MURRAY LEINSTER

It went into atmosphere and its communicators searched the wave-bands of atmospheric radio for messages. There were no radio messages in the atmosphere—nothing but static. But cultivated fields could be seen, and highways, and a city almost below.

The space-tramp hovered over the city, hunting the space-port. It descended to within thousands of feet.

But it did not land. Telescopes showed the city motionless. Ground-vehicles stood still in its streets. Nothing moved anywhere. With greater magnification, there were bodies to be seen, sprawled out and still. Then it could be seen that there had been fighting. There were signs of explosions. And then it could be seen that the city had been looted . . . unmistakably, it had been looted. . .

The space-tramp shot skyward in panic. Instantly it was out of atmosphere it winked into overdrive to get away from there.

Proetus II was the fourth planet to be discovered with all its cities looted and its entire population murdered. . . .

JIM BRENT woke up when the *Deltak's* overdrive field went off ahead of time. A space-liner's overdrive goes on and stays on. A liner goes from one place to another place, on schedule, and there is no nonsense about it. The *Deltak* was en route from Khem IV to Loren II, and it had been in overdrive for two weeks and it should have stayed in overdrive for two weeks more. But the drive went off and Brent woke up. Anybody would. His stomach turned over twice, and he was swallowing hard as he struggled dizzily to a sitting position. He hung to the sides of his bunk as the universe went into that dizzy, diminishing spiral which ended in a fraction of a second but felt like hours. Then he opened his eyes. Instantly, he thought of the girl named Kit.

A voice said soothingly from the speaker in the ceiling of his cabin:

"There is no immediate cause for alarm. Stay calm. The overdrive field has been cut. That is all. There is no need to be alarmed. This is a well-found ship with a thoroughly trained crew, and we are in communication with our base. There is no occasion for uneasiness."

Brent heard every word, and a cold chill began at the base of his spine and went up, vertebra by vertebra, to chill the back of his skull, and then went deliberately down the ladder of his backbone again. The words from the speaker were soothing, but the message was one to chill the blood. For one thing, the voice lied. It spoke of communication with the *Deltak's* base. That was lie number one. It said there was no reason to be disturbed. That was lie number two and on up to infinity. Liners did not cut their overdrives in mid-voy-

age. If and when an overdrive went off—and was lied about—everybody on board the ship was dead. Automatically. But unfortunately they didn't act dead.

Brent waited, feeling sick inside. Then he got up stiffly from his bunk. He put on his clothes. There was no port in his cabin, of course. In overdrive there is nothing to be seen anyhow except out the bow, control-room ports. Overdrive is travel at the speed of light multiplied many times—the multiplier depending on the type of drive.

For almost two centuries humanity had nothing faster than interplanetary drive, and was confined to its home solar system in consequence, because from Sol to the nearest neighbor was four and a half light-years, which would have taken centuries to travel. On overdrive, nowadays, a freighter makes it in a week and a crack liner in a fraction of that time. But they do it in overdrive. Overdrive! If the overdrive goes, the trip is finished. Period.

Brent parted his hair carefully before he went out of his cabin. It was quite absurd. He was thinking. The overdrive's blown. I've got to look after that girl. It was a curious thing to think, because he was of the Profession, and besides, she had never spoken to him.

He knew that her name was Kit Harlow, and that she was wonderfully pleasing to look at. But there had been a reason for not trying to make her acquaintance. Some very strange things had happened. A planet named Derk had been discovered, most unexpectedly, to have all its cities filled with skeletons and all its treasures looted. Another planet named Trem III was found to have all its citizens rotting in the streets of its looted cities.

Four widely-separated planets, in all, had been discovered with their entire populations killed. Two had been painstakingly looted of every valuable which men with unlimited transportation could wish to carry away. And it had been Brent's errand—being of the Pro-

fession—to try to find out how all this had come about. Naturally, he had not thought of getting acquainted with girls, however pretty.

NOW, though, all bets were off. If the *Dellak's* overdrive was blown, nobody had any profession or business or obligations of any sort that reached outside the ship. Nothing anybody did would have any effect, or any meaning, to anybody not on the ship at the same time with him. The *Dellak* was, at the moment, very stodgy and respectable. But presently it would be a first-class

NOT much can be said about Murray Leinster, the author of *OVERDRIVE*, that hasn't been said before. The man whose *LIFE* called "the dean of science-fiction writers" has had such a long and distinguished career of imaginative thinking that it surprises people meeting him for the first time to find out how young he is. Which is good; there is still more ahead of him than past.

—The Editor

imitation of hell. Brent's Professional status was gone and all his obligations with it. It occurred to him that the most useful thing he could do would be to explain the situation to Kit Harlow and offer, politely, to kill her before things got too bad.

He didn't have to think the situation out. In overdrive, an antique ship like this—modern ships did vastly better—would cover a light-year of distance in a week of time. Light travels a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second. In eight minutes it travels ninety-two millions of miles. In a day it travels so far that the distance has no meaning. In a year . . . it travels the distance the *Dellak* should cover in a week. If a ship's overdrive went off—any ship's overdrive—and where it went off was known, still it would take ten thousand

other space-ships ten thousand years to hunt for it with one chance in ten thousand of finding it.

Nobody ever hunted for a ship that vanished in overdrive. It was useless. If the crew couldn't fix whatever was wrong, it wouldn't get fixed. So far, in two thousand years of interstellar navigation, just two ships had been found after their overdrives blew. Each had drifted into a planetary system by pure chance. One had been lost a century and a half when it was discovered. The other had been missing for eight hundred years. Both were blessedly empty of life when they were found—of course—but both showed plain signs of what had happened inside them before life went. Madness was only part of it—the smallest, least, and clearest part of it.

When human beings found themselves imprisoned for always in a metal coffin lost among derisive stars, they ceased to be human. Their food and air would last only so long. They had no hope at all. So the humans in a ship with a blown overdrive went mad. They didn't stop at being beasts. They seemed to find new depths to sink to before the last of them died in gibbering idiosy.

I wonder if there are arms on board, thought Brent. The crew could wipe out the rest of us. Best thing, too.

His mind went back to the girl. Such a pretty girl! She was traveling with her father, who was an Earth Commerce Commissioner and a Very Important Person indeed. They'd been on Khem IV while Brent was there. He'd seen them with a patrolling escort of secret-service men. But Brent had been busy finding out nothing at all. Khem IV was a thinly-settled planet with a savagely totalitarian government, but he'd found no indications of Professional interest. He'd merely been trailed everywhere by unskilled detectives. It was pure coincidence that Kit and Brent traveled on the same ship to Loren II.

I wish she'd missed this ship, thought Brent numbly. It didn't occur to him to wish that he'd missed it.

The speaker in the ceiling repeated: "There is no cause for alarm. Be calm. The overdrive field has been cut. That is all. We are in communication with our base. There is no need for uneasiness."

It occurred to Brent that it was very foolish to keep repeating that message. It would not reassure anybody. Anyone who knew anything would know it was a lie. The more it was insisted upon, the more frightened the passengers would become.

II

HE OPENED the door of his cabin and went out. His door opened on the main lounge. It was full of the *Delilah's* passengers. He'd never seen so many of them at once before. There were some children. They were playing. There was a woman with a painted, empty face. She smiled fixedly, but her eyes were filled with horror. There was a man and a girl—honeymooners, Brent had thought. The girl was chalky-white, and her young husband's eyes were burning as he looked at the other passengers. He was already prepared to kill anybody to defend her. To get her food. To have air for her to breathe . . . there were many faces that had been ruddy in color and now were a curious grayish tint.

Brent looked at the girl he'd thought of first. He moved toward her. A man clutched his arm and babbled:

"Look here! They say—they say the ship's in touch with home. Do you—think that's so?"

Brent nodded.

"Oh, surely!" he said untruthfully. "They have a new faster-than-light communication system. All ships have it now. We'll be all right."

The man gasped in relief.

"You're sure? Positive?" Then he began to laugh foolishly. "Then it's all right! It's all right!"

Brent moved on. It would be wonderful if it were true, he thought sourly to

himself. Now was no time to refuse a comforting lie to someone who needed it.

Jim frowned to himself. There was something in the back of his mind that was trying to come out. But his head wasn't working just right.

Nobody's mind is clear when filled with the numbing knowledge that he is absolutely helpless against absolutely certain doom. Of course the *Delilah* wasn't in communication with anybody or anything. Radiation is propagated at the speed of light, only. If a message-beam could be held tight enough, and if enough power could be put into it, and if it were aimed straight enough—why—a liner like the *Delilah* could send a message back to Khem IV, from which it had departed two weeks before. But the message would take two years to get back. More, it wasn't likely to hit. The sun Khem had a proper motion, which might be anything from fifteen to three hundred miles a second in any direction. The light from it showed it where it had been two years before. A beam would have to be aimed where it would be two years hence. And even then the beam would hardly hit Khem IV in its orbit. No. The *Delilah* could never get a message back to its base. That was out of the question.

We're dead, thought Brent morbidly, all of us. Only we haven't started to act like it yet.

Before they did act dead, things would happen it was not pleasant to anticipate.

He stopped beside the girl, Kit Harlow. She and her father were standing by themselves, looking at the other passengers. Their expressions were peculiar. It wasn't that they didn't know what the blown overdrive meant, but that they were taking it in their own way.

"Pardon," said Brent. "I'm Jim Brent. I think you know what's happened. I—saw you back in port and I'm traveling by myself. Things will be bad presently. I thought I'd offer—"

The girl looked at him detachedly.

Her father said harshly:

"You thought you'd offer what?"

He saw a bitter anger in the older man's eyes. And then Brent realized what the other man was thinking. He flushed angrily.

"We are dead," he said coldly. "You know it. You know what's likely to happen as these people go mad. I intended to offer to help keep things decent for her for so long as it can be managed. I happen to be a fool, and I meant to offer to act like one."

WITH that he turned away, frustrated, bitter. They'd thought he meant something very different. Reasonable enough, at that. Some men, knowing that nothing can make what is coming any worse. . . .

"Just a moment," said the girl.

He turned back. Her voice was just what he'd thought it would be. Clear, and level, and good to listen to. She smiled faintly at him.

"Thank you very much. If you can organize some other passengers, you may be able to prevent some horrors—for a while."

Her father said bitterly:

"I doubt it. That might make things worse. After all, the loudspeakers may have spoken the truth. The overdrive may only be turned off. It may not be blown."

Brent shook his head as if to clear it. He wasn't thinking very straight, and he knew it. Nobody does, immediately after discovering that he cannot have any possible hope. Kit said sharply:

"You really think that?"

"I've been thinking it out," said her father bitterly. "You know what happened where we were! It would be most indiscreet to murder me in any ordinary way. Or you." Then he said harshly, "This young man had better not talk to us."

The girl caught her breath. She went paler.

"I hadn't thought of that!" Then she turned to Brent and said quickly, "My

father is right. We do not think this—accident is just what it seems. There will be confusion and horror, of course. People will go mad, and people will be killed. We—will be among those killed. But we think that—ultimately the overdrive will be repaired. Probably, when it is repaired, the ship will go back to Khem IV."

Brent still could not think very straight. His mind was possessed by the horrors which could be anticipated.

"But—you can do us a very great favor," said the girl. She moistened her lips and looked at her father. He nodded. "It is—very important. Much more important than my father's life or mine. Will you try?"

Brent had been carefully trained to think clearly in emergencies, but this was not an emergency. It still seemed to him pure disaster. There was nothing for his mind to take hold of, to think about.

"First," said Kit, very pale, "you mustn't talk to us again. Don't avoid us conspicuously, but—especially don't try to keep us from being killed. That's necessary."

Brent tried to listen, with the back of his mind trying to tell him something that fitted in.

"Then," said Kit composedly, "when you get back to Earth, go to the Commerce Commission and find someone who knows my father. Tell him exactly what happened to my father and me, and say that we think it happened because the planet ruler of Khem IV had mistak served at a state banquet by mistake. It was served to us. Mistak. V-I-S-T-E-K. It was a mistake. He had his cooks executed for the mistake. And—we couldn't be murdered in any ordinary fashion. That's the message."

She looked again at her father. Again he nodded.

"That's all," she said. "You can't do any more for us. And you can't do that if you are known to be friendly to us. Now please don't talk to either of us again."

She turned away and her father turned with her. As they moved off, a voice panted in Brent's ear:

"He's an important man! What'd he say? He's Earth Commissioner of Commerce! He'd know all the inside! What'd he say?"

IT WAS a pimply-faced man named Rodi, who, during the first two weeks of the voyage, had thrust himself into every gathering, talked to every individual passenger, and had succeeded in making a general nuisance of himself. Brent said briefly:

"He said just what the loudspeaker said. That we're in touch with base and if there's any trouble a rescue-ship will come to take us off this ship."

Again it was untrue, but panic would come soon enough. The pimply Rodi whimpered:

"They can't! They couldn't get word back, and they couldn't find us if they knew we were lost! They couldn't—"

Brent was irritated, but the man was right. A ship's communicators have an extreme, overload dot-dash range of six light-minutes. A ship coming out of overdrive after a two-light-year run is rarely within a light-day of its intended position, either in distance or in direction. A rescue-ship trying to find the *Deblak*—but there could be no rescue-ship—could not know the *Deblak's* error of position or its own. It would be extraordinary if it stopped within two hundred and fifty times the distance at which two ships can contact each other. To search a globe of such size would be utterly impossible.

But Brent said savagely:

"You fool! Do you want to start a panic by habbling like that? Go talk to a ship's officer! Ask him!"

Rodi stumbled away. Brent clenched his hands. Kit's father was an important man. He was too important a man to be murdered in any ordinary way without great repercussions. But why should anybody want to murder him? Why should a ship pretend that its over-

drive was blown, and then repaired, simply to arrange for the death of a man and a girl at the hands of fear-crazed passengers? And the message they wanted him to give— What was that about?

Brent wanted to think. All unconsciously he was beginning to think like a member of The Profession, though he was no longer under any obligation to do so. He was, if the *Deblak's* overdrive was blown, as free of all obligations and duties and all need to think of the consequences of his acts as a man in a coffin six feet underground. If the drive was blown, he was in a coffin midway between suns!

He went to the *Deblak's* bar. There were a dozen passengers already in it. Brent saw one of them furtively filling his pockets with snack-packets. A bad sign—a man preparing to hoard food against his fellows.

Brent ordered a drink of *sarfana*, and the bartender served him. He sipped his drink—and froze. *Sarfana* was a light drink, and ordinarily delicious. It could not be mixed with anything else, though, or its flavor was spoiled. Something had obviously been mixed with this.

He sat very still. This is quick! he thought. If the *Deblak's* officers knew the ship's situation was hopeless, it would be reasonable to have served drinks doctored with sedative. The more unstable passengers, who would crack up first, would be the first to drink. If drugged, they would grow sleepy instead of desperate. That would make sense. But it had not been twenty minutes since the overdrive went off. Quick action, Brent thought. Too quick! Much too quick!

It was.

III

EVERY six months a liner from the Calderian planets landed on Luxor V. Only twenty light-years apart, the light-metal planets found a perfect comple-

mentary economic system in Luxor V. A brisk exchange of agricultural products was only matched by the swapping of lithium and magnesium for bismuth, thorium and uranium, and there was equally friendly interchange of inhabitants.

The liner *Geldaria* had full holds of commercial goods and passengers. The liner came down gently, signalling its arrival and with its communicator teletyping out a list of passengers and its landing even before touching ground.

An explosive shell hit its nose just as the descent was checked because of the suddenly-realized absence of any response. The shell shattered the control-room and all possibility of navigating the huge ship. Other shells smashed into it. It went reeling to the ground with huge gashes in its sides.

Only when there was no possibility of its rising again did any movement show around the edges of the landing-field. Then ground vehicles came briskly toward it to examine it for salvageable loot. Men from the ground vehicles began to cut their way into the wrecked ship, also, to see if by any chance any personable women had survived its fall . . . The men in the ground vehicles were not Luxorians:

They were looters, from somewhere else. All the Luxorians were dead. . .

A WOMAN began to scream hysterically, out in the passenger-lounge of the *Delilah*. Brent turned his head. The pimply-faced Badl was being thrust angrily from her side by another passenger.

The men in the bar talked loudly. Brent sat with the drink of *surfene*—with something else in it—in his hand. Kit Harlow had said that madness and frenzy would come upon the *Delilah's* passengers. The overdrive would stay off until that frenzy developed. It would continue until she and her father had been killed. Then, she had said composedly, the overdrive would be repaired and the *Delilah* would probably return

to the port from which she had started, taking back its shaken, half-crazed passengers and the bodies of those who had died. None of it made sense, anyhow.

One thing was sure. The drinks of the *Delilah's* bar had been doctored within twenty minutes of the cutting of the overdrive. It should have taken nearly that long to be sure that a failure was irreparable. It seemed almost like a measure planned in advance. It was too quick. . .

Brent tasted his *surfene* again. He savored the spoiled flavor carefully, trying to discern what had been added to ruin the delicate flavor. The addition was aromatic, bitter. It was just enough to spoil the pleasure of drinking *surfene*.

It's *iposap*, thought Brent. He tasted again, deliberately. *Tenaris iposap*. It was a flavoring ingredient for mixed drinks, like the ancient bitters. It came in blue bottles with gold labels, and it was very, very expensive, and on some planets it was forbidden by law. Its flavor was fascinating and blended perfectly with most bar-dispensed beverages. It made them taste better, but most people avoided it. One drink, with one drop of *iposap* in it, was very good, but two were murder. Most drinks became fighting drunks when their drinks had been laced with *iposap*, and most drinkers were drunk with two such drinks under their belts.

If all the *Delilah's* drinks had been dished like Brent's, they were not dosed to make drinkers sleepy, but to make them lunatic. In that case, the officers of the *Delilah* were not planning to check the horrors to be expected in any ship helplessly lost in space, but were planning to hurry them and increase them. It was designed that madness should follow instantly upon despair. Decent people were to be overwhelmed by madmen before they could organize to die with dignity.

A child began to scream:

"Mummy! Mummy! Don't let them eat me! He says—"

The simply Rudl scuttled away from a terror-stricken child. The child's mother comforted it absently, her own face ashen.

A man shouted hysterically in the bar: "If we gotta die we oughta kill those officers that didn't take care—" The bartender moved anxiously about his duties—duties which consisted of mixing and serving drinks. Rudl sidled to the bar.

There was weeping in the passengers' lounge. A little girl screwed up her face and began to whimper through the mere contagion of despair. Her father poked her up and began to pat her back, his face vacant of all thought. He looked blankly at the wall, mechanically trying to soothe the child.

There was a thrack of fist against flesh. Someone at the bar, reeling, had struck someone else. Thick-tongued, he defied the world and fate and chance. The bartender set out more drinks. There was no flicker of light to indicate that the drink-charges were being punched on the bar-accounting system. Brent suddenly realized that the charge register had not flashed since he had been in the bar.

QUIETLY Brent spilled his drink and approached the bar. The bartender placed another drink before him. He tasted it. *Spouse* again—and no charge for the drink. Free drinks, and every one laced with the *Fewerins* bitters that made one drink enough for most men, and two too many, and three an incitement to frenzy.

Brent spilled this drink, too, and went casually out of the bar. The atmosphere in it was growing tense and highly-charged. As he went out, a man bumped into him, beaded in. Another passenger needed a drink to help him face the fact that the ship—on the face of things—would drift forever helplessly in emptiness. Forever was a harsh word. There was food and water and air. There was power. The ship could travel between any two planets of a

solar system on its interplanetary drive. Such a journey might take months, but it could be done. It could travel perhaps one light-hour, or even two, but not for light-years. Therefore it would drift forever.

Brent went to his own cabin. Had he not been in the Profession he would have been raging. Instead he was wholly, icily calm. It's the idea, he thought, that she and her father will be killed by these beasts—made into beasts on purpose. Then maybe they'll even execute the survivors just to make everything tidy. In a day or so we'll all be classifiable as criminals.

Getting at some of his luggage and checking on what he extracted from it, he estimated there should be at least one murder on the *Dellikat* within the next six hours. By that time everybody on the ship would have become acutely aware that there was life, in terms of food and water and air, to be gained every time someone else died.

But he underestimated. He was in his cabin less than thirty minutes. When he came out there was already a man dead on the floor of the passengers' lounge, with blood glistening in a dark pool beside him.

IV

IT WAS a very small cruiser, a private ship, built for trips no longer than between *Darien III* and its overlorded moon, which was almost half the size of the planet itself. There were two young men and two girls in it, bound for the family estate of one of the girls on the moon. They came up out of atmosphere and the young man who was piloting the cruiser increased the drive. One of the girls sat beside him, laughing at things he said, which were neither more nor less witty than the things all young men say to make girls admire them. The other couple settled down to a card-game.

They were twenty thousand miles out when the detectors rang furiously. The

pilot bent intently toward his controls. The girl said indignantly:

"It's a ship coming out of overdrive! That's too close for anybody to come out of overdrive!"

The young man stared blankly. It was not one ship. It was twenty. Forty. Sixty. It was a space-fleet! And there was no imaginable reason for a space-fleet to exist or to maneuver as a unit. The couple in the cruiser's control-room called to the others.

"Come up here and look!"

A huge ship turned and sped toward them. It came on at a furious acceleration. The young man piloting the tiny cruiser flicked his communicator-switch.

"Hello," he said curiously. "Who are you and what's all this fleet about?"

There was no answer. But there was a sudden blue-white glow at the bow of the nearing big ship.

The little cruiser's nose glowed. It went incandescent. There was a sudden puffing as its ports melted and let out the air within it. Which, of course, was the easiest way for the young people in it to die. They were quite dead before their cruiser had been melted down to an irregular ball of bright metal. And of course they did not see the great fleet divide into two portions, of which one went on to Darion III, while the other approached its inhabited moon. . . .

NONE of the *Dalshak's* officers was anywhere about. Brent asked questions angrily. No ship's officer had appeared. The dead man lay where he had fallen. Somebody had come out of the bar, reeling. He shouted crazily:

"Everybody's gonna die! Everybody! Who's gonna be first?"

A sober man—now dead—had gone up to him and tried to quiet him, urging that the women were already despairing enough and there was surely no need for the children.

The drunk bellowed, "You be first!" And stabbed. Then he advanced upon other passengers, waving a blood-stained knife and shouting his senseless

refrain: "Everybody's gonna die! Who'll be next?" It was motiveless murder, attributable exclusively to *ipsoop* in too many drinks. Some passengers fled from him. But a young man—one of the honeymooners Brent had noticed—charged with a chair held club-wise. Other men leaped in when he brought it down. The drunk was subdued and disarmed and bound with a volunteer guard placed over him. But no ship's officer had answered the signal—often repeated—that an emergency existed in the passengers' lounge.

It was the young honeymooner who told Brent about it. He regarded Brent with a calculating eye and said grimly:

"My name's Shannon. This is my wife. You've stayed sober, anyhow. If a few of us stick together we can keep things under control."

Brent approved of him, but said shortly:

"That doesn't seem to be the crew's intention. The drinks being served free are loaded with *ipsoop*. That's hardly encouraging."

Shannon said coldly:

"Would they be planning to leave us passengers locked up while they stay in the rest of the ship and have all the food—and air?"

"Hardly anything so simple," said Brent drily. "It's seemed to me that the trouble is being deliberately stirred up, besides the *ipsoop* contribution. There's a man named Rad!—"

Shannon's jaw tightened.

"I'm a construction man," said Brent, which was not untrue in one sense, but was far from the whole truth. "I just got out some keys. You may not know it, but the doors of a space-ship cabin can be locked. You might put the children in a cabin where your wife could take care of them in—relative safety."

Shannon stirred hungrily. Brent slipped two keys into his fingers.

"Give one of these to that girl in the corner, Kit Harlow," Brent commanded. "It's a personal matter."

"I'll do it," said Shannon grimly.

"Thanks. If my wife can lock herself in—"

Brent glanced at the white-faced girl clinging to the other man's arm.

"Maybe she won't," he said. "But anyhow—if it's intended to hurry a breakdown of decency, better not call any meeting to organize anything else. If *Ipsoop* is being served out free to encourage riot, there'll be moves made against a leader of sanity. Watch it."

Brent went back to the bar. The bartender was gone, but he had not locked up. There were open bottles all about, to be used or taken by a gustator. There were more men drinking, now. Some looked dazed and numb, eyes glassy. They stared into space. There were two women at a table. One gulped down a drink and cried shrilly, "I don't want to think! Get me another drink, somebody!" She was already fretful and querulous.

BRENT reached for a bottle and poured out a few drops. *Ipsoop*. He tried another. *Ipsoop*. There couldn't be any doubt. He felt certain objects in his pockets and was grimly glad he'd packed some special tools of a construction-man's using—they had been essential a little while back—in his bags.

A brawny man lurched up to Brent and said thickly:

"I don't like yer face!"

His fist lashed out. Brent blocked the blow, without returning it. Someone else said belligerently, "That's a dastardly trick, with all of us dyin' . . ." Brent's assailant demanded ferociously, "Who's dyin'? I'm not!" He struck. It was senseless. It was sickening. It was not normal drunkenness. There was neither rhyme nor reason in any of it. A man lurched aggressively against Brent. *Crazy fest!* thought Brent bitterly.

He defended himself—ruthlessly, with the inconspicuous but deadly means of defense he had been taught in the Profession.

Fists flew. A bottle crashed. One of

the two women screamed with rage. Her chair had been overturned. She scrambled up from the floor and flew at the nearest man in sight, screaming and scratching. . . .

The tumult grew horrible. It was like what passed for festivity in the lowest of dives. Men laughed drunkenly at the woman, who was now clawing her chosen victim, shrieking abuse at him for having knocked her to the floor—as if that were important with the *Delilah's* overdrive off. The man fought back. The woman's clothing tore.

They're watching her, thought Brent disgustedly, I can try it.

He vaulted the counter, and no one noticed. He crouched down. The front of the bar itself was solid. The bartender had entered through a small, concealed door. Brent found the handle. He went through. He found himself in the smallest of airlocks. He opened the farther door and was in the crew's part of the ship.

He was on a metal cat-walk amid a maze of fabricated girders, with feeble light showing the rounded compartments of the ship's essential machinery. The ship was actually an assemblage of metal balloons enclosed in an outer skin, with stiffening braces running in all directions.

Brent recognized the pattern instantly. The *Delilah* was a Stinson-design freighter modified for passengers. Her hull would be strictly standard in contour to fit inside an overdrive field.

He heard a dynamo-hum. It was making current for the ship's interior lighting. There was also the deep purring of the air-plant. He placed the two sounds in his mind, and from that knowledge could have drawn blueprints for the entire ship. The crew's quarters would be up high, just under the control-room. The interplanetary drive would be just above the ship's normal center of gravity. The overdrive must be in one particular spot because the overdrive field has to enclose the ship centrally. Brent knew where he was

and where everything he wanted to find was, too. He headed for the overdrive room.

There were only dim service-lamps out here. They threw faint glows on the narrow steel plates of the catwalk on which he had emerged. It would lead to the crew-lift—the shaft up to the crew's quarters on which crewmen would rise and descend by the use of stirrups racked on every level. The fuel-tanks were globular, to resist internal pressure. The separate motor-rooms were also globular, so they could serve as air-tight compartments in case of need.

Brent went ten paces down the narrow walk. He rounded the ship's main water-tank. Then he vanished. He simply reached out, grasped a curving truss-braced girder, and swung into the obscurity between the giant metal balls. The girders, in pairs and with stiffening-members between them, were wholly practical ways to move from one place to another. Service-crews in space-ports used them.

HE CLIMBED into blackness, making no noise. Presently he was under the air-plant room. He heard the rushing sound of turbines pulling air through hoses from the several compartments through the ship.

Brent listened critically to the noise of the air-plant, as an indication of the age and design of the ship.

He was about to move on when he heard the rattle of a stirrup on the crew-lift. He watched. A figure descended slowly. He peered by a light in his descent. It was not a crew-member, but the passenger Radl. He got off the lift-shaft, clipped the stirrup in its rack without fumbling, and moved along the catwalk Brent had used only minutes before.

He's been reporting, thought Brent coldly. They've probably figured out their time-table. So many riots, so many dead, so much of the unspeakable, and then they'll decide it's time to declare the overdrive repaired. And they'll go

back to Khem IV because that's the ship's home port and murder has been done, and the passengers who survive will be tried and executed for having reacted to despair and the scoop that was given them.

He waited until the pimply man had vanished. Brent heard the click that told of the tiny airlock closed. He swung away, then, across the dim space of the ship's interior.

It was as he wormed his way toward the overdrive compartment that things fell into place with a click that was almost audible in his own thoughts. He realized what the message Kri had given him meant. It was suddenly the clearest and most obvious thing in the world that the planetary ruler of Khem IV would have his cooks executed if they served an Earth Commerce Commissioner a fruit called *visdek* on a planet called Khem IV. *Visdek* came from the other side of the Galaxy! It came from nine thousand light-years away!

Brent could see precisely why that accident had made it necessary for the *Delek's* overdrive to be cut off until Kri Harlow and her father were dead. It was a matter he was especially trained to see, because it was a matter concerning his Profession.

V

THERE was a fire in the planet metropolis of Sardin VI. It had been a very beautiful city, with wide ways and splendid buildings of the beautiful, colored woods native to the planet. Those woods were used for jewel boxes on many distant worlds, because they gleamed like opalescent gems, and most of the buildings of the city were made of them. Even pictures of the city were admired for their subject-matter rather than their painting. It was said to have been the most beautiful place in which human beings ever lived.

But it was burning. It had burned for days. Beginning where a spark jumped because rain beat through a

smashed window, it had been a very small fire at first. A child's foot could have stamped it out. But there was no child to stamp on it. It burned.

The second day of its burning, it could still have been extinguished. Perhaps on the third or even the fourth. But no one tried to save the city. It went up clouds of resinous smoke from a wider and ever wider space.

Now the sun set upon its burning. It blazed from one horizon to the other. When night fell, even the sky above the city did not turn dark, but glowed sullenly from the flames that leaped and danced where the masterpieces of man's greatest architecture crumbled. From one horizon to the other there was a sheet of fire, in which columns and palaces slowly shriveled to ash. It was undoubtedly one of the most spectacular and tragic sights in history.

There was nobody left to see. . . .

THE overdrive compartment, like all the others on the *Dellik*, was a great round ball of metal with welded goria. Brent reached it and put his ear cautiously to the rounded wall. He listened for minutes. There were minute ringing noises in the metal, some of which were actually remote echoes of the air-plant's noises. But any large structure of metal, unless especially muffled, always has such noises. Sometimes they are easily heard, and then specemen say that it is a singing ship and the superstition is that it is lucky. The *Dellik*, though, was not musical enough for that.

There was someone in the overdrive-room. Brent made sure. So before he swung around and into the entrance, he got something out of his pocket, and he stepped through the door with a small pocket-blaster out and ready.

The engineer was sitting in a folding foam-chair, staring at nothing as if fascinated by his own thoughts. As Brent loomed over him, he hooked his lips. Then he jerked his head up, startled. He saw that Brent was not a

crew-member, but a stranger. He made a convulsive movement.

"Bail!" said Brent warningly. The tiny blaster bore very steadily. "What's up? Why is the overdrive off?"

The man choked, staring with horrified eyes at the blaster's muzzle. Brent glanced aside for the fraction of a second. The master-switch was open—the engine-room switch. He only needed to look directly at that. Without moving his eyes he could see that the telltale dial that would locate trouble—almost invariably hopeless trouble if it happened in space—were still hooded over. They were never used except in part to check the circuits—and of course, hopelessly, if something did go wrong in space. Between uses they were covered with plastic hoods to protect them from dust. They hadn't been unhooded. So there had been no attempt to find trouble. So there wasn't any trouble. The main switch had been opened on orders.

Brent moved the blaster suggestively.

"I said," he repeated softly, "what's the trouble? Why is the drive off? And don't talk loudly—why are the passengers invited to go mad with fear?"

The *Dellik*'s engineer tried to speak.

"I—I—" Then his throat closed with a click. With a visible effort he tore his eyes from the blaster-muzzle and looked up at Brent's face. His expression was one of sheer terror.

"How about throwing the switch on?" asked Brent. The engineer moved trembling hands to obey—but Brent saw a gleam of hope in his eyes, or was it a gleam of cunning? Brent snapped, "Don't touch it!" Then he said as softly as before. "That was just a check-up. If you threw the switch, it wouldn't start the engines. It would just light up a 'ready for operation' light in the control-room, wouldn't it? And they'd know there was something wrong here. And they'd come—and maybe you'd live."

The engineer gasped:

"Don't—don't kill me!"

"Suppose you tell me how much you know," said Brent, eyes burning.

The engineer moaned softly.

"So you don't know," said Brent, "that the overdrive was to be turned off, the passengers driven mad, and when the right people had been killed the ship was to turn around and head for port. The surviving passengers would be tried for murder, eh? How about the crew?" he asked with sardonic softness. "Did you stop to think that the crew might be executed for not preventing the passengers from murdering each other?"

The engineer babbled. He was a pitiable sight, but Brent was merciless. There were hundreds of thousands of colonized planets, now, with local histories up to two thousand years in length. Earth could not govern them—which was why the Profession was a necessity—and there were nearly as many forms of social organization as there were planets. Khem IV was a totalitarian government quite ruthless enough to do exactly what Brent had just named—and the engineer knew it. He whimpered.

Brent looked at him with scornful pity.

"But what can I do with you?" he demanded. "Apparently I know more than you do about this mess."

The engineer whimpered again. Then, with the frantic speed of desperation, he sprang from his chair at an alarm-bell on the wall. Brent pulled trigger. There was no sound. The engineer's body thumped into the rounded hollow wall of the overdrive room, and then slumped down on the floorplates in the boneless limpness of a man killed by a blaster.

Brent put the blaster back in his pocket.

HE NOW regarded the overdrive with a grim and knowledgeable attention. But he couldn't afford to muddle with it just yet. He noted, though, the details of its installation. It was a good fifty years old. It had been installed by someone only half-qualified, by really

modern standards. They haven't read an *engineering journal* since this ship was built! he thought grimly. They'd never heard of the Doorn-Welt equation, for one thing, which shows with such beautiful clarity how and why turning part of the second-stage exciter into a closed circuit gives multiplied space-modification effect. Brent—it was incidental to qualification for the Profession—could work on this drive for a bare few minutes and—

He nodded to himself. But the crew would be armed and desperate, and the passengers were already half-crazed with fear. Alarm the crew further and they might commit a massacre. . . . and to reassure the passengers would alarm the crew. Technically it would be easy, but humanly it was impossible, he thought. Yet the impossible would have to be done.

He moved about the absurdly simple apparatus that was the overdrive itself. It was merely a long bar of brightly-polished metal with a peculiar greenish cast. At its ends it branched into slender rods—almost wires—that went through the skin of the overdrive room and spread out and branched again and again until they ended in pointed projections a few inches only beyond the plating of the hull. There were four separate coils of seemingly bare copper wire, placed in particular relationship to the bar. And that was all. Even the copper seemed uninsulated. But Brent knew better than that.

He climbed away from the engine-room with the body dangling and jerking as he climbed among the girders in the semi-darkness.

It was almost an hour later when he reached the passengers' lounge again. He'd brushed himself carefully before re-entering. But nobody would have noticed, anyway.

A small group of passengers had gathered together, quietly and grimly waiting for something. The men—there were not too many of them—were varying expressions of pure desperation. Be-

hind there were the women. Behind the women were children. There had been fighting. One man had a crude bandage covering half his face, as if someone had clawed at his eye all too unsuccessfully. There were some bent and broken chairs.

Kit Harlow and her father were near the group. Kit's face was shockingly pale. Her dress was torn. Her father's features were battered. Blood ran down one temple. A slow, deep rage, deeper than even his fury over what he had discovered, shod Brent to the very brim. He heard a startling from the bar. "They think they're too good for us! They think—" It was the voice of Rudl—the pimply-faced man whom Brent had seen on his journey to the ship's control room. Brent ground his teeth.

Shannon, the young bridegroom, came conspicuously toward him.

"Where were you?" he demanded coldly. "We could have used you just now."

Brent said harshly:

"There should be knives in the dining-salon. Haven't you thought of that?"

Shannon started. He beckoned to other men. Brent led the way. The tables were bare. Brent jerked at drawers. There was the cutlery. He began to dump it into a table-cloth pulled from a table. Shannon helped.

"Forks too," said Brent between his teeth. "They can stab."

They went back, with arms. There were large carving-knives, which would be deadly. Brent brought table-linen, cloths and the like. He showed a man how to wrap a table-cloth around his left forearm, so it would serve as padding against the blow of a club, or would ward off a knife. It was a trick out of antiquity, and it was a space-man's-diver trick, too. He began to help pass out knives. He came to Kit, and whispered shortly:

"I saw the swordrive. It's in perfect working order. We've got a chance. Don't let yourself get killed yet!"

But he raged at the signs that she had been forced to struggle in the riot

he had missed. He went back into the dining-salon and burdened himself once more. Then he went to the bar and with brisk, angry motions threw water-pitchers over the heads and onto the heads of the men inside it.

It would have been suicidal with normal men. But the crowd in the bar was half-crazed by ipsoap—made frantic by a deliberately excessive dosage. Every man clutched some drinkable while Rudl exhorted them. They were drugged and drunken and he worked them up. . . .

The noise was that of wild beasts turned loose. A man came staggering out of the melee, made suddenly cold asher by blood which jetted from his throat. He looked down at it stupidly, and leaned against the wall mutely imploring help from those he had joined in attacking only a little while ago.

It was too late. His knees sagged and gave way under him.

But Brent did not see that. He'd made a diversion. He had the pack fighting blindly. He dived into the fray.

There are tricks of fighting among rioters and drunken men. They are not pretty tricks, but they are effective. Brent used them—sparingly.

BRENT got through, crouched below visibility and fighting his way savagely he reached Rudl. And the pimply man did not know he was endangered until a fist sank deep into his belly, and he collapsed—and a fist connected scientifically with his jaw. Then Brent crouched over him, searching him swiftly. He found a flat case. He reached up and put it in the pocket of one of the surging mob about and above him. Then he dragged the pimply man to the wall and, crouched low, with his head protected by his hunched shoulders, he worked his way out again.

He was not unscathed. His clothes were ripped and he was bleeding when he dragged Rudl out of the door. He was staggering and panting, alike from the beating and the exertion, when he blindly essayed to open a cabin door and

drag Radl inside. Two figures followed—Kit and her father.

"Close the door!" Brent panted.

Instantly he began to tear strips from the bed-clothing to blind his victim. His hands. His feet. He disarmed and gagged the pimply Radl.

"I should—kill him," he said, breathing hard when it was done. "He was an agent provocateur assigned to stir these dragged fools to murder one another—and you. He had a communicator on him. It carried every sound he heard and every word he spoke to the control-room. One of those drunks in the bar has it on him now. It's still keeping the listeners in the control-room entertained. But I haven't got much time—"

Kit said quietly:

"It's no use. This is arranged. My father and I are to be killed. If we—locked ourselves in our cabins and—used the blasture on ourselves it would save other lives."

Brent said, still panting.

"I've killed the overdrive engineer. Now I've manhandled this man and planted his communicator on someone else. When the skipper finds his engineer missing, it won't take him long to figure that somebody knows what's up! When he finds that Radl's out of circulation and his communicator's in another man's pocket, he'll know somebody understands the whole game! And will he dare leave any passenger alive, if one of them knows what he's up to?"

Kit had been pale enough. Now she went even paler.

"I think," she said with difficulty, "that you have doomed everyone."

"Maybe I have," growled Brent.

"Your murder has been effectively bungled, now. And I rather think that the government that ordered this won't be too merciful to bunglers!"

Kit's father said unsteadily:

"Your prisoner, here, just heard what you said. Was that wise?"

Brent stared at the trussed-up Radl. He seemed unconscious. But Brent leaned over him and lifted an eyelid.

A pupil—an eye glared at him. But an unconscious man's eyes roll back. A lifted lid shows only the white.

Brent laughed.

"It wasn't wise for him. If I know rotten governments, when they send somebody out to do dirty work, they give them a psycho test afterward to make sure they didn't learn anything they shouldn't. So Radl, now, is going to learn something he won't like. If we passengers are killed—which begins to look possible—and if Radl lives to get back, he'll be sorry, because when his psycho test shows that he's found out why you two needed to be killed. . . ."

Kit stared at him. Brent nodded at her.

"There've been four planets found with all their cities looted and all their people dead. You, sir," Brent looked at the Earth Commerce Commissioner, "you found out the first clue to what's happening. You were served sixth at a banquet in the palace of the planet ruler of Khem IV. And sixth doesn't grow on this side of the Galaxy, and can't be brought here. It's just as impossible to have sixth on Khem IV as it would be to build a space-fleet capable of murdering and looting whole planets, without a word of the matter leaking out. It's impossible. But it's happened. And you've guessed the answer, I suppose, just as I have. And now our friend Radl may guess it too. But if he gets back home with the news, his government will kill him for knowing too much." Then Brent said grimly, "He probably knows how, too. Just to make sure—"

He bent over the bound man, whose eyes were now open and rolling wildly.

"Radl, your home planet's the base from which ships take off to loot and murder. The ships weren't built there and they aren't manned there. They come from a long way off in a brand-new fashion which isn't even overdrive. If you get back home, the psycho tests will show you know that much, and I suspect you know they'll spend a lot of

time and effort on you, trying to get you to tell them more."

The heavy eyes of the prisoner were wild with terror.

"I don't like this man," said Brent. "I'd intended to turn out the lights and let him wake up in the darkness. In blackness and silence, and unable to move a muscle, he'd probably have thought he was dead and in hell. But this is better. Come on—"

He led the way out of the cabin. He locked the door behind him, with one of the keys no passenger was supposed to have.

VI

THERE was a place on Proeus II where the air was very, very still and the atmosphere was one of utter unreality because there were no noises. There were no noises at all. There was a village a little distance off— quaint, comfortable houses, and a tower for the reception of power for the houses and farms nearby, and there was a highway which was straight and white. But there were no sounds.

It was vacancy. The grass was suitably green, and it grew thickly. The trees threw. But there were no insects. No birds flew. The barnyards of the farm-houses showed no motion whatever. Nobody moved in the village street. Nothing happened.

The really incredible thing, though, was the stillness. If there had been anyone to notice, the whole landscape would have seemed like an incredibly perfect stereo-view—frozen in color and in silence. There should have been tiny mice crawling feverishly in the grasses. There should have been flying things in the air. The highway should have had—at least occasionally—a smoothly streamlined vehicle rushing to the sound of high-pitched whistling from beyond the horizon to pass swiftly upon the long white way.

But nothing moved for a long, long time. The village was utterly still. The

fields were utterly silent. The air was utterly empty. Presently a little wind began to blow. Then there were the sounds it made. There were no others. Over all the planet Proeus II there was no sound except that of the wind in the trees, and the pattering of rain, and the sound of surf on its beaches.

There would be no other sounds until men came from somewhere and buried its people and moved into the houses and began to replace the treasures that looters had taken away, and began to live there again. They would bring animals, at first, and then birds and insects too. Men would not like to live on a world where there were no longer any noises except of their own making. They would hear ghosts. And men do not like to live with ghosts.

But the fields were very bright and green in the sunshine. . . .

IN BRENT'S own cabin Don Harlow, who was an Earth Commerce Commissioner but whose face was bruised and swollen and who had blood down the side of his face—Don Harlow said quietly, "What are you?"

Brent had an open traveling-bag on the bank. It did not contain clothing. It was a tool-chest. But it contained a very curious assortment of tools and instruments. He chose with some care but more haste. He was stuffing his pockets.

"I'm a man in a hurry," he observed. "Why do you ask?"

"I want to know," said Kit's father mildly. "Because either you are an extraordinary fool, or you are extraordinary in some other way." He drew out a small medal, hanging on a chain about his neck. He twisted it oddly and showed it to Brent. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Brent hesitated. Then he said:

"Y-yes. But it doesn't put me under your orders. I'm afraid I rank you."

Don Harlow, who was a Very Important Person indeed, turned to his daughter and said drily: -

"The Profession." Then he looked at

what Brant showed him, and added, to Kit, "I am ranked. I do take orders from him."

"I'd like it," said Brant, "if you could get this suicide-complex out of your daughter's mind."

Kit's eyes were glowing. She drew in her breath sharply. The Profession, of course, was something wholly unofficial, and wholly unpaid, and it was usually considered fabulous. It was an activity that nobody admitted to exist, because it was contrary to all reason. Not one person in ten thousand had heard even a rumor of it on Earth. Elsewhere it was not even a rumor, but it was very much of a necessity.

There was not, though, any simple way to describe it. It was a loose association. Some of them had official position and rank, like Kit's father. Some were quite inconspicuous individuals like Brant. They did things which were often illegal and frequently preposterous, and they were never rewarded at all. Sometimes they were severely punished. But those who were of the Profession were very proud of their membership and their work.

It had started long, long ago. With tens of thousands of colonized planets in the Galaxy an Earth imperialism was impossible as a practical matter. Even a planetary government, for so large a population as Earth had, was almost unworkable. There is a limit to the number of people who can actually be represented by any organization with authority. On Earth, the first planetary government proved unwieldy. No government could function efficiently over such great areas and over such masses of people. On Earth, the first planetary government had to subdivide into associated nations of practical size, and the top authority was now a Council with limited powers over individuals. It had to be that way! From the first it was realized that Earth could not rule its colonies. They had to be free in order to exist.

Earth's colonial governments were

ones of every conceivable complexion. But Earth could not interfere with them. It could not fight them without conquering them, it could not conquer them without ruling them, and it could not rule them. An interstellar government was simply not a practical matter if the welfare of the people it ruled, rather than the vanity of its rulers, were to be its prime objectives. And Earth had a quaint tradition that government was instituted for the people.

But there were madmen in the Galaxy who wished to rule anyhow. If Earth claimed the right to stop them, it would claim empire itself, and that meant exactly the evil Earth deplored. So the Profession came gradually into being, as a form of patriotism owing loyalty to a higher level than nationality or even one's native planet. The Profession tried desperately—and sometimes with surprising success—to prevent the lunacies of warfare. Only one thing made warfare possible—the development of super weapons, and the Profession worked single-mindedly to prevent just that.

BRENT, as a member of the Profession, had absolutely no legal status or authority save to ask for help from other members of the Profession. He had only the obligation—given him by his training—to move about the Galaxy and try to make sure that no one world anywhere acquired new weapons it did not share immediately with its sister worlds. Perhaps it was absurdly idealistic, but—as history has shown since, and all too clearly—it was the way by which civilization endured.

As now. . .

He closed his tool-kit carefully and said:

"I was working in the Cepheus star-cluster. They were building a big fleet of new-type space-ships there. I got in to the construction-crew to make sure there were no new tricks being included that were kept secret. My papers are in order for that work. But I heard

about Procus II being found murdered—the fourth planet killed and looted by somebody from somewhere. I headed back to Earth through this section, trying to pick up rumors here and there. On Khem IV, I'll admit, I didn't find a thing. It's a bearded tyranny, of course, but if people stand for that sort of thing, they invite it. That wasn't my business. But I didn't find a whisper of evidence that a space-fleet could be built and armed on that planet, able to do what has been done."

Den Harlow said briefly:

"It wasn't built there. It wasn't armed there. It couldn't be! I made my Commerce Commissionership an excuse for traveling about—just as you manufactured an excuse. But Kit and I were served *vistak* at an official banquet. And I've tasted *vistak* before, over on the other side of the Galaxy."

Brent said:

"I've heard it couldn't be shipped, even frozen. When cosmic rays hit it, it goes bad. Even the seeds rot when cosmic get at them. So it's only able to be eaten within a week's space-journey from the planet where it grows normally."

Den Harlow nodded.

"It's a wonderful fruit," he said, with the ghost of a smile. "I enjoyed it heartily—even though when I tasted it I knew it hadn't been brought across the Galaxy by a spaceship. It was so inconceivably foolish to serve it to me, though, that I couldn't believe the Khem IV planet ruler knew where it came from. I thought it might have been given to him as a gift—something like that. So I asked. But he knew! He looked deadly. Later, I heard he had his cooks executed for serving it to me."

"And then," said Kit ruefully, "we knew that we'd be murdered so we couldn't take word back that a fruit which can't be shipped from the planet it grows on had been brought clear across the Galaxy. We've been extremely careful. The only hope we had was that we could be so careful that our mur-

ders would look suspicious to the Profession. After all, my father's official position made it awkward to murder us outright. That would have been suspicious!"

"Now, though," he told her, "you two will try to stay alive."

She nodded, her eyes bright.

"I'm going to see if I can do something practical," he added.

"Yes. Be—careful, will you?"

He opened the cabin door and went out. He was half-way across the passengers' lounge before he realized that it was not quite necessary for one person in the Profession to ask another to be careful. It wasn't Professional. It was—well—personal. And she'd looked at him with bright eyes. . . .

The bedlam in the bar was dying down, now, with Rod no longer on hand to stimulate it. Badly beaten men wanted fresh drinks. Victors in battle wanted to celebrate. But there were some unconscious figures on the floor. They might be sunk in drunken sleep, or they might not. A woman was dancing tipsily, casting sickeningly inviting glances about her.

He went into the dining salon. Into the kitchen. Both were empty. Presently they were empty even of him. He had returned to the empty spaces between the balls of metal-plate inside the *Dellah's* skin. When he went out the air-lock, he had a blaster ready in his hand.

Not quite an hour later, a simultaneous and unanimous gasp sounded in the passengers' lounge. It was almost a cry, choked and incredulous, from every throat among the passengers.

Each of them had exactly the same experience. The cosmos had seemed to them to whirl dizzily in an expanding spiral. Then their stomachs turned over, twice.

The ship's overdrive had come on again. The passengers who'd seemed nearest to madness from terror and despair, now seemed closest to going out of their minds with joy. The *Dellah's*

was again moving through space in overdrive!

They did not realize that there was a great difference between this overdrive and the one that had been out off.

VII

THE message went in on a very tight beam, and it was a double-transmission. It could be received only on a very special instrument.

An answer went out. It would take time to reach its destination in emptiness. The answer was similarly complex in its transmission, but its meaning was quite simple. No, there were no ships due from anywhere. No. There was no reason for a space-fleet not to come in. Yea. The apparatus on the ground was quite ready.

Then, on the ice-cap, a huge framework began to come up out of what seemed a crevasse in a glacier. It rose and rose and rose. There was a square metal frame. It heaved up smoothly until it reared two hundred feet high in a waste of frozen snow and ice. It was two hundred feet across. It was filled in, absolutely, by a shimmering silvery film which had the curious optical quality of an absolutely perfect reflector.

It waited.

Presently there were humming sounds in the sky. A wire-basket transmitter pointed skyward, sending a guiding beam. A dark shape appeared. It descended swiftly. It moved toward the square frame with the shimmering silvery film. It moved into that film. It vanished.

It did not come out on the far side of the framework. It went into the film and ceased to be. Another dark shape descended, and another and another and another. . . . In a somehow evil procession a space-fleet descended to atmosphere, and projected itself into the appearance of a silver bubble-film—and it was not. There were sixty vessels.

When the last had vanished, the square framework began to descend

again. It sank down into what seemed to be a crevasse. Then there was nothing but a small and inconspicuous building on a snow-cap, an ice-field, which reached for hundreds and hundreds of miles in every direction. The space-fleet was not anywhere around. Not anywhere within thousands of light-years of the planet Khem IV. . . .

NOW there was a vastly different atmosphere in the passengers' lounge of the *Deffak*. The ship was back in overdrive! With returned spirits, they tried to forget the two dead men in a silent cabin. The passengers were sure that everything would be all right now. The *Deffak* was headed on for port. Oh, undoubtedly she was on her way to Loren II, where she had been bound in the first place!

Meanwhile there were injured to be cared for. There were too many of them. Those who had been only drunk were sleeping heavily. Some wept hysterically, remembering. Some—less self-conscious—turned from maniacal frenzy to a beaming, maudlin affection for all their supposed kind. *Ipseop* did not make men beasts. It merely helped the beast within them express itself. Now, relieved of terror and horror and dread and despair, they were like lambs. But still there were too many wounded men.

Kit looked at Brent with warm, admiring eyes. He had not only accomplished great things, but he was of the Professor. And that was a very great thing. Young Shannon came over to Brent, his wife following timidly behind him.

"There's been nobody showing up," he said in a low tone, "to tell us we're back on overdrive. They should be coming in to explain that now they've fixed everything. Why haven't they?"

Brent said:

"They were pretending to be busy. Now they are busy!"

"Doing what?" asked Kit, watching his face.

"Trying to find out what I did to their

overdrive—though they don't know I did it. Also they're trying to turn it off."

"Can't they?"

"Not unless they smash it," Brent told her in grim amusement. "And I don't think they're that desperate yet. But they're on the dizzy side! The overdrive shouldn't work, and it does. They didn't turn it on, but it's on. And they can't turn it off. But that's not the worst of it, from their standpoint."

He looked at Kit, but he felt a little pang of envy of the young bridegroom, whose wife touched his arm lightly and seemed perfectly confident and content. Brent had never had a girl act that way about him. He hadn't wanted any to. But, looking at Kit, he knew that it would feel very satisfying.

"The worst of it," he said drily, "is that it's a different overdrive altogether. This is an old ship. It had a maximum speed of a light-year of distance in a week of time. But some tricks have been found out since she was built. One is a better set-up for the exciter-coils. It's beautifully simple if you understand it, but it can't be fooled with if you don't. If you change the second-stage exciter just exactly right, the overdrive speed shoots away up! I made that change. The *DeMik*'s traveling a light-year every four hours, now. It ought to show up in the control-room, and up there they should be starting to go crazy."

If he knew spacemen, they would be.

JUST such inexplicable factors were enough to put the crew into a panic. With the *DeMik* running wild, out of all control and going forty-odd times faster than possible, the crew should be close to gibbering.

But the passengers were beautifully confident. Even Kit said relievedly:

"You've made the ship go faster? Then we'll soon be landing on Loren II!"

"We've passed it," said Brent. "Some time ago. I could handle the ship, but the skipper can't, but he'd kill me if I tried to explain. He'll never be able to

land this ship by himself now."

The last was true. If the skipper of an old-style Diesel ship suddenly found the speed of his craft multiplied by forty-odd—like the *DeMik*'s—and had only the feeblest of crawls—like the *DeMik*'s interplanetary engines—for law, he'd have trouble docking. Either he'd run the dock before he could stop, or else he'd cut his engines so far off-shore that he'd never attain it against wind and tide.

Ben Harkaw said:

"Then where are we going, if not to Loren II?"

"I've no idea," admitted Brent. "But I'm a lot less worried than our skipper. He really has something to worry about!"

In planetary drive, all the stars blazed. From a control-room there was light on every hand. Suns glimmered in a myriad colors. There was no spot where the eye could rest—when a ship was moving on interplanetary drive—where a bright or faint star did not glimmer.

In overdrive of the type built into the *DeMik*, there had always been stars straight ahead, which moved and writhed as the ship drove on. They seemed to streak away from the bow in every direction, moving more and more swiftly as they spread, but suddenly dimming to go out entirely. All about and behind the ship was blackness. It was a horrible, tangible blackness, and from the control room it had always seemed as if the *DeMik* fled madly to escape from a huge bag of pure darkness which forever pursued her.

The new overdrive was worse. There was just one tiny bright spot visible. It was straight ahead. It changed in brightness and in color. Sometimes it almost went out. Always it flickered toward extinction, and brightened again, but always it seemed that next instant it would go out entirely and then the *DeMik* would be left alone in a monstrous emptiness in which nothing else existed at all—that it would be engulfed in a cosmos in which there was literally

nothing but itself, and there could be no destination because nothing else was. It would not be good for the nerves of an unprepared man to look out the bow-ports of the *DeMok*, just now.

Kit continued to smile warmly at Brent. But her father protested:

"But we must be going somewhere!"

"The trouble is that we may be headed anywhere," said Brent. He explained awkwardly, "I thought I'd better install the new drive to jolt the crew a little. I was afraid they'd miss their engineer, and Rodi, and start investigating in the passengers' quarters. I came to help in case they did. But they're busy. I'll go back and finish my job."

Kit said hopefully:

"May I come and help?"

"There may be trouble," said Brent. "They may be hunting for the engineer."

"I've a blaster now," she reminded him. "You gave it to me when you disarmed Rodi. I could watch while you work."

Her father said matter-of-factly:

"She's a very good shot. And as for the danger, if anything happens to you we're all dead anyhow."

"We'll go through the kitchen," he told her. "There's a door to the rest of the ship from there."

THERE was a woman in the kitchen, though. She was unskillfully preparing food for a child who stayed close to her. The woman said fretfully, "After all the terrible things that have happened, I do think the officers would send the cooks back!"

"They're probably all working to keep the overdrive going," said Kit gravely.

The woman sat the child on a stool and began to feed it. They did not want her to see them disappear into the working section of the ship. Kit rummaged for food for the two of them. She brought Brent a half-warm lunch-pack.

"We should talk," she suggested. "I'd like to know about you."

"You know everything that's impor-

tant," he said briefly. "You know how I think things tie in?"

She waited, watching him admiringly. He felt the admiration and liked it. But he pretended not to notice.

"There's been theorizing," he said in a low tone, "that even overdrive isn't the limit in transportation. On the face of it, it's happened. Vistek fruits can't be shipped from the planet they grow on, because cosmic rays reduce them to an unpalatable pulp. Nobody's ever been able to make a vistek seed grow away from the planet Malden—and that's on the other side of the Galaxy."

Kit urged him to continue.

"There's one way it could have gotten there," Brent told her quietly. "A transmitter. A transmitter of matter. In theory that would be instantaneous. But so far as the Profession knows it's never been done. But vistek on Khem IV proves it has been done."

"It follows," said Kit sagely. "Of course!"

"A transmitter on Malden, and a receiver-transmitter on Khem IV. There's a tyranny on Khem IV. There's a barbarous empire out at Malden. There's an emperor with an aristocracy and torture-chambers and an army and navy. Right?"

"So my father said," she agreed.

"He'd have delusions of grandeur," said Brent sourly. "It's an occupational disease of emperors. He'd have ambitions to make an Empire that would include all humanity. It's been proved that it won't work, but he'd think he could work it. And if he got hold of a matter-transmitter, he could shift his space-fleet anywhere he pleased much faster than any fleet could follow it to fight it."

Kit said matter-of-factly, "My father doesn't think they would try conquest at first. They'd poison the air of a planet and kill everybody, and then loot it afterward. That would be to reward the army and navy. Then they'd attack key planets. Earth, for one. They'd destroy the strong planets which could make

fighting-fleets in days, if they wanted to. They'd raid, first—striking, sneaking back home by matter-transmitter, and then striking again. Bit by bit they'd whittle away the strength of civilization. When it was weak enough, they'd take over what was left."

"And they've knocked off four planets right here," said Brent coldly, "through a matter-transmitter that must be on Khem IV. They can bribe with the loot of worlds—I wonder how many other places they raid from?"

The whole concept was overwhelming in its destructive potentialities.

Brent saw red. But then the woman in the kitchen lifted her child down from its stool. She wiped off its face saying bitterly:

"At least they ought to let the cooks back!"

She led the child out of the kitchen. Brent said curtly:

"Let's go!"

HIS personal affairs, and even the situation on the *Deblak* faded into insignificance beside the situation only the three of them on the *Deblak* fully recognized. If this scheme succeeded, civilization—in terms of freedom for men—would be chipped away and chipped away until only an empire swollen with loot and armed past resistance would be left. . . .

The two of them got into the tiny air-lock that was the egress from the kitchen into the crew's part of the ship. And suddenly Brent's thoughts drew back from the immensities of galactic dangers, and he was acutely conscious of the fact that Kit was pressing close beside him. He knew that she looked up at his face in the tiny cubicle. And he realized with unforgotten astonishment that even with so much more important matters in hand he wanted very badly to kiss her then and there.

But he didn't. Instead, he opened the air-lock's outer door. Then they were in that unearthly area of metal balloons held in place by spidery girders, and

dim lights, and danger.

Brent led the way. Abruptly, he stopped and pointed out the way to climb across the girders. Kit followed him without fear. There were many small sounds here; the dynamo-whine, and the air-plant noises, and now and again faint clickings of relays.

But suddenly there were voices.

Lights among the empty spaces were few and dim. The voices sounded eerily, reflected so many times and so erratically among strange metal shapes. But there was a near-riot in being. There were yappings. There were snarlings.

Then a deep voice roared. There was a crackling, rasping sound. Someone screamed. The deep voice roared again.

Brent whispered:

"They're getting worked up. That sounded like a try at mutiny, and a hand bent-beam ending it. The crew probably wanted to smash the overdrive regardless, and somebody had to be shot . . . I wouldn't like to be in the skipper's boots."

The yappings and snarlings ceased. There were whinings instead. The deep voice bellowed. The bawling and whining stopped.

"The skipper's still in charge," said Brent. "We'll soon end that!"

Kit's shoulder touched his. She clung to a narrow girder in a dimness filled with geometrical shapes. There were humming reechoes of the noises just ended.

"I've got my Master ready if they come this way," whispered Kit. "If they do smash the overdrive, can you fix it?"

He nodded. She smiled at him. Their faces were very close. It was a ridiculous time and place for such things, but suddenly he found himself kissing her.

She kissed him back. Her eyes were joyous. She had to hold fast with both hands or she would drop from the girder. He stopped in panic. She laughed softly. This was the strangest of possible times and places for a man and a girl to kiss each other. Then he said feverishly:

"Come on! Let's get to some place where it's solid!"

VIII

IN A GREAT plain outside the capital city of the planet Malden there were gigantic structures showing the silvery gleam of matter-transmitters. No visitors ever came to this city. It was not allowed. Very, very few visitors indeed ever came to Malden any longer. Travelers were told there was a quarantine, or that space-lines to Malden ran rarely.

If a traveler did reach Malden, he did not leave. Not ever.

But the people of Malden did not mind. From time to time the communication-systems of the planet gave notice. Then great mobs assembled before the matter-transmitter films. Presently the bluish mists of space-ships appeared, and space-ships came out of the wavering films, in long lines of ugly shapelessness, and they settled on the meadows. Then the mobs surged toward them.

And the crews of the space-ships threw out treasure to the mobs. Jewels, and gold, and fine fabrics, and all the treasures of looted Galaxy were lavished on the Malden population. And then the Emperor showed himself, strutting, and shouts of adulation filled the air. True, only a fraction of the brigand-ships' cargoes was distributed, but that was richness. True, the Emperor himself possessed such wealth as had never been dreamed possible, but that was natural.

The Emperor and the people of Malden, alike, believed that they would go on forever like this. That the planet Malden could be a bandit stronghold while it tore down the civilization of the worlds beyond, and then—without changing—be the capital of the empire of all inhabited worlds.

That was foolish. Its downfall had already begun. . . .

THE man at the controls of the *Delilah* began to stream crazily. The con-

trols did not control anything. The ship sped on through a horrible blackness which had only one tiny point of light in it, and that faint glimmering blinked and wavered and seemed perpetually about to go out. Nothing changed her motion. Nothing could touch her. Nothing could communicate with her. She was a runaway in a cosmos of nothingness which seemed constantly about to swallow her forever.

The helmsman, whose helm controlled nothing, beat with his fists at the bow ports which opened on blackness. He seized something—he did not know what—and battered blindly at everything and anything about him. And he screamed. . . .

Brent finished his work. It was a highly unlikely task he had set himself, and he performed it in a most improbable fashion. He took control of the *Delilah* with a pair of tiny, animal-hair brushes and two containers of quick-drying fluid, plus two small instrument-cases from his pockets.

He took one of the cases out and wrenched off a magnetic keeper, and put the case against a girder. It clung instantly. It was very near to one of the rods of greenish overdrive-alloy which ran through all the ship in a specific design. He opened a container of liquid and began to paint, very painstakingly, a line of quickly-drying liquid from one point of the box to another spot some little distance away. He painted another line, and another, and another, perhaps a dozen, in all. A little later he painted narrower lines down the center of each of the original lines, with liquid from the second container, and using the second brush. This was nearly the end of his task.

Kit stayed close to him. When he moved, she moved to remain as close to him as she could. As he worked, Brent thought in astonishment, *So this is how it happens!* He led a tiny line of liquid to the greenish-tinted rod. He moved back to the small box clinging to the steel beam. Kit followed him. *I like it!*

Brent thought absently. He made a liquid connection to a metal stud on the box. It dried immediately.

He stood up in the near-darkness.

"Finished," he said.

Kit went back into his arms.

The space-liner *Deblak* sped on. She traveled, now at some two thousand times the speed of light. In a day she covered nearly twice the average distance between solar systems. In a week she would go from one star-cluster to another, in a month from one quadrant to another. In a year she would travel farther than mankind had expanded in the first two thousand years of space-travel.

Presently, almost reluctantly, Brent and Kit moved back toward the passengers' quarters. In the air-lock that led in they were again pressed closely together. But this time Brent bent down hungrily to the face lifted up to him.

LATER in Den Harlow's cabin, Brent closed and locked the door. He took the second of the two essential cases from his pocket.

"This is a microwave relay," he explained. "I was working on ships out in the Cophis cluster, you remember. This is a gadget used to test circuits when you don't want to be right on the spot. The relay-box is out near the ship's skin. This controls it. I've got a dozen different circuits lined in to that box, and from here I can work with any one of them. As long as I have this in my hand, I should be able to run the ship from anywhere in it, only since I can't see outside the ship, it's no use for navigating."

He explained the manner of his re-wiring job. Of course the ancient practice of bulky insulation had long been abandoned. Nowadays, dipped in this lacquer, a wire became insulated by a transparent, almost infinitesimal film which was proof against any voltage.

He recounted the Thommason Law, which explains the superconductivity of mercury and tin and other metals at

four degrees Kelvin. He explained that he had made his connections to his relay-box by first painting a stripe of insulation along the ship's girders, and then had painted a narrower stripe of dissolved superconductor in the middle. A superconductor has literally no electrical resistance at all. A thread the size of a spider's web will carry a hundred thousand amperes without heating. So Brent had very simply and effectively concentrated all the controls of the *Deblak* at his remote-controlled relay by means of stripes of practically invisible lacquer. And he should now have the ship entirely obedient to him in his cabin.

"We'll shake 'em up a bit first," he said tensely, "and then send some dot-dash stuff on their lighting system."

Kit watched his face. He opened the relay-control box. He pushed a button. Instantly there was the dizzy spiraling of all space and a feeling of acute nausea. The *Deblak's* overdrive was off again. He left it off for three seconds. He pressed another button. The spiraling—in reverse—and again the nausea. The ship was again traveling at two thousand times the speed of light. He left it on three seconds, and cut it, and left it off three seconds, and threw it on again. He did it with deliberate rhythm, so there could be no doubt that it was being done by intention.

"The passengers will panic again," he said, "but I can't help that!"

He gave them a series of jolts by flicking the overdrive on and off.

"Now I'll talk to them," said Brent. "This is the ticklish part."

He began to press and release another button on the relay-box. It was dot-dash communication, utterly primitive in form but still used for emergency communication by space-craft. As Brent pushed and released his button, the lights in the crew's quarters and all the working part of the ship dimmed and brightened. It would amount to the most self-evident yet untraceable form of signalling.

"I-a-m s-t-o-w-a-n-y," he ticked off. "Y-o-u c-a-n-n-o-t f-l-a-d m-a."

The light in the cabin went out. Brent groped in his bag and a tiny but very fierce bluish-white battery-lamp glowed. It lighted the small room, and Den Harlow watching, and Kit looking warmly at Brent.

"Smart man, the Skipper," said Brent grimly. "He thinks fast. When I started sending him signals, he turned out our lights. If I demanded to have them back on again he'd know a passenger was responsible."

He ticked off:

"I w-i-l-l r-e-s-t-o-r-e c-o-n-t-r-o-l t-o y-o-u. I-f y-o-u p-r-o-ceed t-o n-e-a-r-e-t b-a-b-i-t-a-b-l-e p-l-a-n-e-t a-n-d e-a-t a-n-o-w-e-r w-i-a c-r-a-w l-i-g-h-t-i-n-g s-y-s-t-e-m."

"What could he do?" asked Kit breathlessly, "if he won't believe you?"

"He could pump air out of the passengers' quarters," said Brent. "But he couldn't bleed it out into space while we're in overdrive. Not unless he went crazy!"

He watched a tiny dial on the relay-control box.

A long time later, the dial on his control-box kicked. He watched it.

"He's agreed," he said skeptically. "My guess is he'd have to shoot all his crew if he didn't. But he's in a bad fix!"

He signalled again, for a long time.

"I've told him his new speed and given him ten hours to find a planet. I told him how to handle the ship on planetary approach. Now we'll see what happens."

He put the case in his pocket. He unlocked the door. He put out the light from his bag before he opened it.

Blackness pervaded the passengers' lounge. A woman was weeping hysterically. Then someone flicked on a pocket lighter. It was a tiny point of light. The overdrive went off. It stayed off for minutes. Brent murmured: "He's picking a nearby solar system—astrostation."

The overdrive went on again. Kit said:

"Shouldn't the—passengers be given some hope?"

"Not yet," said Brent.

There was a long wait. A tense wait. Then the lights came on.

There were crewmen coming out of the bar and the kitchen and the steward's air-lock. They had blasters bearing on all who stirred. They were frightened, as well as desperate. A man in a skipper's uniform, with dark brows almost meeting over his forehead, glared at the again-terrified passengers.

Brent said sharply to the two beside him:

"Get hold of something! Quickly!"

He caught at a chair-rail on the wall with his right hand. His left went swiftly into his pocket.

The skipper said, raging:

"Go ahead! Wipe them out!"

He raised his blaster to aim at Den Harlow.

And then all weight vanished. The ship's artificial gravity went off.

Brent shifted hands, holding himself steady with his left hand. The skipper did not realize, for a moment. He raised his blaster. As his arm and the heavy weapon rose, his body tilted gracefully forward. The blast made a spurt of smoke from the floor. Then Brent fired with his soundless pocket weapon. There were shrieks of terror from the passengers.

THEY fell. Endlessly. Horribly. Interminably. Their feet did not press upon the floor. They could not flee or dodge. They could not even turn their bodies. If a woman tried to thrust her child behind her, she found herself floating inches from the floor and the child an uncontrollable floating object which moved her as she moved it. A man lifted his hands before his eyes to shut out the sight of doom, and his body rotated grandly so that he floated face-down. There was not a person who could move from the spot where he had been standing—because there was no traction of his feet upon the floor. But there was no movement of a body's member which did not change the angle of the

body to the floor and walls and ceiling. And there was the sensation of ghostly falling toward infinity. . . .

But Brent was anchored. His first shot had killed the skipper as the skipper's aim was made impossible by his lack of weight. There was bedlam. Crewmen, their faces contorted, tried to shoot, but they could not aim either. To move one's hand meant that one's body moved also, in the opposite direction. And the crew was half-mad anyhow.

Holding fast and steadied by his grip, Brent fired with complete ruthlessness. He found himself gripped, and Kit was studying herself by him and shooting gallantly, too. And Dan Harlow had not heard Brent's command in time to obey. But he floated calmly, and turned his wrist only, and deliberately pulled trigger when and only when his blaster bore upon a crewman with a blaster he was trying to use.

Brent followed:

"Throw your blasters away or every man dies!"

Six men threw down their blasters and bleated for mercy, in such a state of panic and horror that their cries were unintelligible.

Then Brent put his left hand back in his pocket and the ship's artificial gravity came back on. Passengers and crewmembers alike toppled to the floor from whatever position they had assumed with relation to it.

"Shannon!" barked Brent. "Pick up those blasters! Shoot any man who tries to get them again!"

Kit's father moved forward grimly to help. Kit pressed close against Brent, desperately ready to fire in his defense, until the crew members who survived were hucked into one of the cabins and the door locked upon them with a key Shannon nonchalantly pulled out of his pocket.

"Now," said Brent, his eyes burning. "We've got to see if there are any more. They figured they had to yield to an unknown stowaway, but they weren't going to let anybody tell about them

after he got off. Distribute those blasters where they'll do some good, Shannon! Who's coming with me to the control-room?"

BRENT surveyed the situation. The control-room was familiar enough, if old-fashioned. Panels of the wall were dented and smashed. Somebody had gone out of his head with panic. But the instrument-board was unharmed. Kit was close behind him, her brows knitted.

"Hm. . . ." said Brent. "I'm no astro-gator, but I can manage after a fashion."

He pushed a button marked "General Communication." He spoke into a microphone.

"I am about to cut the overdrive once more," he said firmly, "to make sure we are headed for a planetary system. I will let you know what I find."

His voice would resound through every portion of the DeMak's fabric. The passengers might still be fearful, but that could not be helped.

Brent cut the drive. With the ship's main telescope he inspected the star straight ahead. He made quick estimates.

"We are within ten minutes' travel of a solar system," he said to the microphone. "I am going to take the DeMak there and land."

Into overdrive. He smiled at Kit. Then he said:

"Orders for former members of this ship's crew, Shannon, take the spacemen down to the exit-port. Have them carry all dead bodies of other space-men—no passengers. Have them ready to land."

He smiled again at Kit. Time passed, and passed, and passed. Brent threw off the drive. The stars sprang into being all around the ship. And they were amazingly close to a habitable world. Brent regarded it critically and said:

"Passengers will not land until all members of the crew are off. This is an order!"

He had no authority to give it, but there would be no protest.

He swung the ship on her gyros. He let down, slowly at first but then with increasing confidence. Mountains appeared below. They swelled and grew large. He saw signs of cultivation—not intensive, but there were humans here.

He could see trees. He slowed the *Dehllak's* rate of descent. Handling an unfamiliar ship, it was an uneasy business. Tree-branches and then tree-trunks crashed and crackled as the ship settled to the ground. Brent punched the exit-port speaker-button and ordered:

"Crew to ground, carrying all bodies of crew-members."

A light glowed on the panel. "Exit Port Open." Shannon had done that, or Kit's father. Only moments later Shannon's voice came:

"Crew all aground."

The "Exit Port Open" light faded. Brent gave the interplanetary drive his attention. The *Dehllak* lifted once more. In seconds the blue sky turned purplish. Presently it was black, with many stars.

In half an hour, Brent turned off the drive. The *Dehllak* floated on. He stared out the ports. The local sun was definitely sol-type and there were other planets. He used the main telescope. He said briefly: "That one is inhabited. Ice-caps and all the rest. Some oceans."

He began to operate the gyro controls to turn the ship. All the multitude of stars about the *Dehllak* seemed to turn in a stately maneuver. He centered the planet. Then he carefully placed it a trifle away from the cross-hairs of the scope. He reached over and barely touched the overdrive. Space swirled and swirled again. They were in perfect landing-position. He sent the ship toward the second planet.

"We'll let the passengers off here," he said. "It's inhabited and they'll get along all right. But I don't get off. After all, the Profession's no advantage. It's an obligation. According to the law I'm a pirate for mutinying against the

lawful skipper of this ship, and of course it's a capital offense to maroon anybody, as I just did to the survivors of the crew. I'm liable to prosecution for several murders, mutiny in space, marooning, piracy . . . and when the passengers tell their side of the story—I'm going to take the ship and go on off."

"I think that's the right thing," said Kit with conviction.

"You and your father will get word to Earth that there's almost certainly a matter-transmitter on Khem IV, and that what's happened to Procus and Sardin and Laxor and so on—you'll get the word back?"

"No," said Kit.

"What's that?" he demanded sharply.

He glanced out the bow-ports. The planet they neared was green and pleasing. It looked as if it would be a kindly world. There was at least one city. The passengers of the *Dehllak* would want to land there. And most likely stay there.

"Anyhow," said Kit, "my father says you'll be trying to find Earth to take the news yourself. He's going to come along with you. So are the Shannons. I asked them to. There ought to be at least three or four men on a ship this size." Then she added irrelevantly, "Besides, my father likes you. Very much."

Brent swallowed.

Kit looked intently at her fingernails.

"It might be nice," she said slowly. "And—my father said—in case I should think of anything so foolish or so drastic—he's a Commerce Commissioner and so automatically a magistrate. He said if we wanted him to, he'd—he'd marry us."

The green globe ahead was a world that humans lived on all their lives. It was a nice world. It was an admirable world. It grew slowly larger as the *Dehllak* drew nearer to it.

It was fortunate, though, that for some little while Brent didn't have to pay exclusive attention to the controls.

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I am very pleased for your most wonderful cure for the stopping of smoking. Ever since I received my APAL I have smoked cigarettes with me, but never had the desire to use them. It is the most wonderful of all cures.

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HEALTH CULTURE ASSOCIATION

(Dept. 45), 345, HIGH HOLBORN, LONDON, W.C.1



There were dots of light

Three-Legged Joe

By JACK VANCE

He was a triple threat to the fortune that awaited them

IT MIGHT be well to make, in passing, a reference to old-time prospectors. Their experience has been gained through vast hardship and peril; no cause for wonder, then, that as a group they are secretive and solitary. It is hard to win their friendship; they are understandably contemptuous of academic training. Much of their lore will die with them and this is a pity, since locked in their minds is knowledge that might well save a thousand lives.—Excerpt from Appendix II, Hede's Manual of Practical Space Exploration and Mineral Survey.

John Milke and Oliver Paskell sauntered along Bang-out Row in Merlinsville. Recent graduates of Highland Technical Institute, they walked with an assured and casual stride in order to convey an impression of hard-boiled competence. Old-timers on porches along the way stared, then turned and muttered briefly to each other.

John Milke was rubicund, energetic, positive; when he walked his cheeks and tidy little paunch jiggled. Oliver Paskell, who was dark, spare and slight, affected old-style spectacles and an underslung pipe. Paskell was noticeably less

brisk than Mike. Where Mike swaggered, Paskell slouched; where Mike inspected the quiet gray men on the porches with a lordly air, Paskell watched from the corner of his eye.

Mike pointed. "Number 432, right there." He opened the gate, approached the porch with Paskell two steps behind.

A tall heavy man sat watching them with eyes pale and hard as marbles.

Mike asked, "You're Abel Cooley?"

"That's me."

"I understand that you're one of the best outside men on the planet. We're going out on a prospect trip; we need a good all-around hand, and we'd like to hire you. You'd have to take care of chew, service space-suits, lead samples, things like that."

Abel Cooley studied Mike briefly, then turned his pale eyes upon Paskell. Paskell looked away, out over the swells of naked granite that rolled six hundred miles west and south of Martinville.

Cooley said in a mild voice, "Where you had thinking to prospect?"

Mike blinked and frowned. It was his understanding that such questions were more or less taboo, though of course a man had a right to know where his job would take him. "In strict confidence," said Mike, "we're going out to Odifara."

"Odifara, eh?" Cooley's expression changed not at all. "What do you expect to find out there?"

"Well—Pillson's Almanac indicates a very high density. Which, as you may know, means heavy metal. Then the Dead Office shows neither claims nor workings on Odifara, so we thought we'd better survey the territory before someone beat us to it."

Cooley nodded slowly. "So you're going out to Odifara . . . well, I tell you what to do. Get Three-legged Joe to wait on you. He'll make you a good hand."

"Three-legged Joe?" asked Mike in puzzlement. "Where do we find him?"

"He's out on Odifara now."

Paskell came closer. "How do we locate him on Odifara?"

Cooley smiled crookedly. "Don't worry about that. Leave it to Joe. He'll find you."

FROM the house came a dark-skinned man five feet tall and four feet wide. Cooley said, "James, these boys are going prospecting out on Odifara; they're looking for a flunky. Maybe you're interested?"

"Not just now, Abel."

"Maybe Three-legged Joe is the man to see."

"Can't beat Three-legged Joe."

Paskell drew Mike out to the street. "They're joking."

Mike said darkly, "No use trying to get work out of those old huns. They get by on their pensions; they don't want an honest job."

Paskell said thoughtfully, "Perhaps it's as well to go out by ourselves; it might be less trouble in the long run. These old-timers don't understand modern methods. Even if we found a man that satisfied us, we'd have to break him in on the Plesley generator and the Hurd; he'd have the generators out of adjustment before we'd been out twice."

Mike nodded. "There'll be more work for us, but I think you're right."

Paskell pointed. "There's the other place—Tom Hand's Chandlery."

Mike consulted a list. "I hope this doesn't turn out to be another wild goose chase; we need those extra filters."

Tom Hand's Chandlery occupied a large dirty building raised off the ground on four-foot stilts. Mike and Paskell climbed up on the loading platform. A scrawny near-bald man approached from out of the shadows. "What's the trouble, boys?"

Mike frowned at his list while Paskell stood aside puffing contentedly on his pipe. "If you'll take us to your technical superintendent," said Mike, "I think I can explain what we need."

The old man reached out two dirty fingers. "Lemme see what you want."

Mike fastidiously moved the list out of reach. "I think I'd better see someone

in the technical department."

The old man said impatiently, "Son, out here we don't have departments, technical or otherwise. Lamma see what you want. If we got it, I'll know; if we don't, I'll know."

Milke handed over the list. The old man hissed through his teeth. "You want an ungodly amount of them filters."

"They keep burning out on us," said Milke. "I've diagnosed the trouble—an extra load on the circuit."

"Mmph, those things never burn out. You've probably been plugging them in backward. This side here fits against the black thing-a-ma-jig; this side connects to your circuits. Is that how you had 'em?"

Milke cleared his throat. "Well—"

Paskell took the pipe out of his mouth. "No, as a matter of fact we had them in the other way."

The old man nodded. "I'll give you three. That's all you'll use in a lifetime. Now for this other stuff, we got to go around to the front."

He led them down a dark aisle, past racks crammed with nameless oddments, into a room split by a scarred wooden counter.

At a table near the door three men sat playing cards; nearby stood the dark thick man called James.

James called in a jocular baritone, "Give 'em a jug of acid for Three-legged Joe, Tom. These boys is going out to prospect Odfare."

"Odfare, eh?" Tom scrutinized Milke and Paskell with impersonal interest. "Don't know as I'd try it, boys. Three-legged Joe—"

Milke asked brusquely, "What do we owe you?"

Tom Hand scribbled out a bill, took Milke's money.

Paskell asked tentatively, "Who is this Three-legged Joe? . . . A joke? Or is there actually someone out there?"

Tom Hand bent over his cash box. The men at the table snapped cards along the grooves felt. James had his back turned.

Paskell put the pipe back in his mouth, sucked noisily.

On the way back, Milke said bitterly, "It's always been the same way; whenever these old-timers have a laugh on a stranger, they play it for all it's worth. . . ."

"But who or what is Three-legged Joe?"

"Well," said Milke, "sooner or later, I suppose we'll find out."

ODFARE ranked fourteenth in a scatter of dead worlds around Sigma Sculptoria, drifting in an orbit so wide that the sun showed like a medium-distant street lamp.

Paskell gingerly handled the controls, while Milke scanned the face of the planet with radar peaked to highest sensitivity. Milke pointed to a mirror-smooth surface winding like a fjord between axe-headed crags. "Look there, an ideal landing site—perfect!"

Paskell said doubtfully, "It looks like a chain of lakes."

"That's what it is—lakes of quicksilver." Milke turned Paskell a chiding glance. "It's absolute sure down there; it can't help but be solid, if that's what's on your mind."

"True," said Paskell. "But it has a peculiar soft look to it."

"If it's liquid," scoffed Milke, "I'll eat your hat."

"If it's liquid," said Paskell, "neither one of us will eat—ever again. Well—have gone."

The impact of landing substantiated Milke's position. He ran to the port, looked out. "Through, can't see anything in this light without booster goggles. In any event, we'll have a good level floor for our assay tent."

Paskell saw in his mind's eye a page from Hade's Manual: "The assay tent is customarily a balloon of plastic film maintained by air pressure. Its use eliminates noxious, acrid or poisonous fumes inside the ship, formerly a source of great annoyance. Certain authorities advise a field survey before bringing out

the tent; others maintain that erecting the tent first will facilitate examination of samples taken on the survey, and I generally favor the latter practice."

Milke said off-handedly, "Some of the boys like to wait before they put up their bubble; others set it out first thing to give them a place to drop off their samples. I generally like to get it up and out of the way."

"Yes, yes," said Paskell. "Let's get it up."

In space-suits, with booster goggles over their eyes, they left the ship. Paskell looked across the quicksilver lake, up into the jutting rock—icy bright and black through the booster goggles. The lake gleamed like buffed nickel, terminating nearby in a long finger pointing up a delta. In the direction opposite it dropped off around the curve of the horizon.

Paskell said in a tone of dubious humor, "I don't see Three-legged Joe anywhere."

Milke's short rounded lead in the ear-phones.

"He's supposed to know we're here."

Milke said crisply, "Let's get to work."

From an exterior locker they took the assay tent, carried it fifty feet across the quicksilver to the length of the air hose. Milke turned the valve; the tent swelled into a half-sphere fifteen feet in diameter.

Milke tested the lock with a deftness attained on lunar field trips. He squeezed the lock compartment against the tent, forcing the enclosed air into the tent through a flap valve; then entering the lock, he sealed the outside entry, opened the inside valve, letting the compartment fill with air, and entered the tent.

"Works fine," he told Paskell confidently. "Let's get the equipment."

FROM the locker they brought the knock-down bench, carried it inside through the lock. Milke brought out a rack of reagents and the pulverizer. Paskell carried out the furnace, then

went into the ship for the spectroscope.

"That should be good for a while," said Milke. He shot a glance up at distant Sigma Sculptaria. "It's a six hour day here—about two hours of light left. Fed like taking a quick look around?"

"It might be a good idea." Paskell fingered the empty loop at his belt. "I think I'll get my gun."

Milke chuckled. "There's nothing alive here; it's a vacuum, absolute zero. You've let that talk of Three-legged Joe get you down."

"Quite right," said Paskell. "In any event, I'll feel better with my gun."

Milke followed him into the ship. "Might as well get in the habit of wearing the thing." He holstered his own gun.

They set out across the lake, past the tent, up the narrow finger of quicksilver, into the delta. "Strange stuff," said Paskell clucking a fragment from the cliff. "Looks like chalk—gray chalk."

"Can't be chalk," said Milke. "Chalk is sedimentary."

"Whatever it is," said Paskell, "it's still strange stuff, and it still looks like chalk."

The fissure widened, the cliffs fell away almost at once; another quicksilver lake spread before them. "Makes for easy walking," observed Milke. "Better than scrambling through the rocks."

Paskell eyed the mirror-like surface which would like a glacier past alternating bluffs, and in a perceptible curve over the horizon. "It might easily be connected all the way around."

Milke mentioned to him. "See that pink stone? Rhodocrosite. And look down at the end—somehow it's been fused and reduced, leaving the pure metal."

"Very encouraging," said Paskell.

"Encouraging?" boomed Milke. "Why it's downright wonderful! If we found nothing else but this one vein, we're made . . . perhaps it might even be economical to mine the quicksilver . . ."

Paskell glanced at the sun. "There's not much daylight left; perhaps—"

"Oh, just around that next bend," said

Milke. "It's easy walking." He pointed ahead to a massive knob of shiny black material projecting from the crag. "Look at that knob of galena—interesting."

Paskell felt a throb and hum at his side. He looked down to the dial, stopped short, walked to the left, turned, walked back to the right. He looked up toward the knob of shiny black rock. "That's not galena, that's pitchblende."

"By Jove," breathed Milke reverently, "you're right! As big as the Margan-Ana's strike . . . Oliver, my boy, we've made."

Paskell said with a puckered brow, "I can't understand why the planet hasn't been developed . . ." He glanced nervously up into the deep shadows, perceptibly lengthening. "I wonder—"

"Three-legged Joe!" Milke laughed. "Fairy-tale stuff." He looked at Paskell. "What's the matter?"

Paskell said in husky whisper, "Feel the ground."

Milke stood stock still.

Thud-bump. Thud-bump. Thud-bump.

THE sun dropped behind a crag; even the boosters found no light in the sudden shade. "Come on," said Paskell. He turned, paced hurriedly back up the lake.

"Wait for me," said Milke breathlessly.

At the ridge of chafky rock which divided the two lakes, they paused, looked back. The ground felt solid, immobile under their feet.

"Strange," said Milke.

"Very strange," said Paskell.

They crossed the ridge; the hulk of their ship caught the last flat rays from Sigma Sculptoris.

Paskell came to a sudden halt. Milke stared at him, then followed his gaze. "Our essay tent!"

They ran forward to where the fabric lay in a crumpled heap. "There's been a hole cut in it," muttered Paskell.

"Three-legged Joe?" inquired Milke sarcastically. "More likely there's a leak."

Paskell kicked at the material, now stiff as sheet metal with the cold. "We'll have a devil of a time finding it."

"Oh not so bad. We'll pump in warm air—"

"And then?"

"Well, there's a leak. As soon as the air hits the vacuum the water vapor condenses. So we look for a little jet of steam."

Paskell said in a precise voice, "There's no leak."

"No? Then why—"

"We never turned on the heat. The air inside liquefied."

Milke turned away to look out over the lake. Paskell quietly plugged in the cord; power circulated through elements meshed into the tent fabric.

Milke turned back, snapping his gloves together. "That's about all we can do until the air thaws out . . ." He looked at Paskell, who again was standing as if listening. Irritably he asked, "What's the matter now?"

Paskell made a furtive motion toward the ground. Milke looked intently down.

Thud-bump. Thud-bump. Thud-bump. Thud-bump.

"Three-legged Joe," whispered Paskell.

Milke looked hurriedly in all directions. "There can't be anything out there." He turned. Paskell had disappeared.

"Oliver! Where are you?"

"I'm in the ship," came a calm voice.

Milke backed slowly toward the port. Night had come to Odifera; starlight shone on the quicksilver lake, intensified by the booster goggles to near the power of moonlight. Was that a black shadow standing in the duffle? Milke hurriedly backed against the port.

It was locked. He pounded against the metal. "Hey, Oliver, open up!"

He looked over his shoulder. The black shape seemed to have moved forward.

PASKELL came to the port, looked carefully out past Milke, threw back the bolts. Milke burst into the air-chamber, on into the ship. He took off his helmet. "What's the idea locking me

out? Suppose that damn whatever it is was hot on my tail?"

Paskell said in a practical voice, "Well we'd hardly want him inside the ship, would we?"

Milke roared, "If he got me first I wouldn't care whether he got into the ship or not." He jumped up into the central dome, played the searchlight around the lake. Paskell watched from the sideport. "See anything?"

"No," grumbled Milke. "I still don't believe there's anything out there. Let's eat dinner and get some sleep."

"Perhaps we should keep watch."

"What do we watch for? What good would it do if we saw something?"

Paskell shrugged. "We might be able to deal with it, if we knew what it was."

Milke said, "If there is anything out there—" he slapped the holster at his belt, "I'll know how to deal with it . . . A couple ammo into its hide and we'll have to scream for its piece."

The ship vibrated; from the tail came a harsh sound. The floor jarred under their feet. Milke looked askance at Paskell, who puffed rather desperately at his pipe. Milke ran back to the searchlight. But the central dome interrupted the backward path of the beam and the tail was left in darkness.

"I can't see a thing," fretted Milke. He pumped down to the deck, looked indecisively at the after port.

The vibrations ceased. Milke squared his shoulders, pulled the helmet back over his head. Slowly Paskell followed suit.

"You bring a flashlight," said Milke. "I'll have my gun ready . . ."

They stepped into the air lock. Paskell gingerly thrust his arm out, aimed the light toward the tent. "Nothing there," grumbled Milke. He pushed past Paskell, stepped down to the ground. Paskell followed, played the light in a circle.

"Whatever it was, it's gone," granted Milke. "It heard us coming."

"Look," whispered Paskell.

It was no more than a sig-sag of shadow, a moving mass.

Milke held out his arm; his gun spat pale blue sparks. Explosion—a great splash of orange light. "Got him!" cried Milke exultantly. "Dead center!"

Their eyes adjusted to the pallid illumination of the flashlight. Nothing but the glistening sheen of the quicksilver and—a crumpled tumbled mass where the assay tent had stood.

Milke said in an outrage too deep for vehemence, "He's ruined our gear—our tent!"

"Look out!" screamed Paskell. The flashlight took lunatic sweeps over the lake. Milke sent shot after shot at a tall shape; the explosions smote back on their suits; the orange glare blinded their eyes.

Thud-bump . . . Thud-bump . . . "Inside!" gasped Milke. "Inside, we can't hold him off . . ."

The outer port slammed. A breathless moment later the hull jarred, scraped along the quicksilver. Milke and Paskell stood haunted and pale in the center of the deck.

Metal creaked at the stern under pressure or torsion. Milke's voice came high-pitched. "We're not built to take that kind of stuff—"

The boat lurched to the side. Paskell put his pipe in his pocket, grabbed a stanchion. Milke jumped up to the controls. "We'd better get out of here."

Paskell cleared his throat. "Wait, I think it's stopped."

The boat was quiet. Milke thought of the searchlight, flicked the switch. "Hah?"

"What is it?"

Milke stared out the port. He said slowly, "I really don't know. Something like a one-legged man on crutches . . . That's how he walks."

"Is he big?"

"Yea," said Milke. "Rather big . . . I think he's gone, through that fissure—" He came down to the deck, split open his space suit, climbed nervously out. That was Three-legged Joe.

Paskell took a sudden seat on the bunk, reached for his pipe. "Quite an im-

pressive fellow."

Milke laughed shortly. "I can certainly understand how he scared the be-jabbers out of those old hindleestiffs."

"Yes," Paskell nodded earnestly. "I can too." He lit his pipe, puffed reflectively. "He can't be invulnerable . . ."

Milke dropped lenderly upon his own bunk. "We'll got him—somehow or other."

Paskell craned his neck out the port. "There'll be light in a few hours . . . I suppose we might as well sleep."

"Yes," said Milke. "If Three-legged Joe comes back, I imagine he'll let us know about it."

SIGMA SCULPTORIS washed the quicksilver lake with the palest of lights. Milke and Paskell glumly examined the wreckage of the assay tent.

Milke's indignation brimmed over the restraints he had set upon himself. He clenched his fists inside the gloves, glared toward the debris. "I'd like to lay my hands on that three-legged devil . . ."

Paskell busied himself among the tatters of the tent. "Nothing but ribbons."

Milke said gloomily, "No use to think about mending it . . ." He watched Paskell curiously. "What are you looking for?"

"I wonder what possessed him to break into the tent."

"Sheer destructiveness."

Paskell said thoughtfully, "I notice one thing—" he paused.

"What?"

"All our reagents are gone."

Milke bent over the wreckage. "All of them?"

"All the acids. All the bases. He left distilled water, the salts. . . ."

"Hm," said Milke. "What do you make of that?"

Paskell shrugged inside his suit. "It's suggestive."

"Of what, if I may ask?"

"I'm not sure." Paskell wandered out over the quicksilver, searching the surface. "He was about here when you shot at him?"

"Just about."

Paskell bent. "Look here." He held up a rough brownish-gray object the size of his thumb. "Here's a piece of Three-legged Joe."

Milke examined the fragment. "If this is all those pellets did to him—he's tough. This stuff is flexible!"

Paskell took back the fragment. "Let's take it in and run it through the works."

They returned into the ship. Paskell clamped the bit in a vice and after exasperating difficulty, succeeded in slicing free a brittle shaving. He forced it flat between a slide and a cover glass, examined it under the microscope. "Remarkable."

"Let's see," Milke applied his eye. "Hm . . . It's like a carpet—woven in three dimensions."

"Right. No matter which way you cut or tear, fibers mat up against you . . . now let's see what he's made of."

"You're the technician," said Milke.

PASKELL looked up from the work bench an hour later. "It's a very complex silicon compound. The spectro-scope shows silicon, lithium, fluorine, oxygen, iron, sulfur, selenium, but I can't begin to put a name to the stuff."

"Call it Joe-hide," Milke suggested.

Paskell blew into his pipe, looked solemnly down at the workbench. "I have a tentative theory about Joe's inner workings. . . ."

"Well?"

"Obviously he needs energy to exist. His hide shows no radioactivity, so he must use chemical energy. At least I can't think of any other form of energy that he could be using."

Milke frowned. "Chemical energy? At absolute zero?"

"He's insulated. No telling how high his internal temperature goes."

"What kind of chemical energy? There's no free oxygen, no fluorine, nothing. . . ."

"Presumably he uses whatever he can get—anything that reacts to produce energy."

Mike pounded his fist into his hand. "We could bait him into a trap, with, say, a chunk of solid oxygen!"

"I should certainly think so. But what kind of trap?"

Mike scowled. "A dead-fall."

"Here on Odessa gravity is not too strong . . . we'd have to stack ten thousand cubic yards of rock to make an impression."

Mike paced up and down the room. "I've got it!"

"Well?" said Paskell mildly.

"Perhaps you could make a detonator that we could set off from the ship."

"I should think so."

"Here's what we'll do. We'll set out about twenty pounds of myradyne, with the detonator in the center. Joe will come past, tuck this handle into whatever kind of stomach he's got. We wait till he gets a few hundred yards from the ship, then set it off."

Paskell pursed his lips. "If events proceeded along those lines, everything would be fine."

"Well, why shouldn't they? You claim that Joe eats—"

"Not 'claim'—'theorize.'"

"—anything that produces energy. Well, the myradyne should look to him like ice cream and candy and cake all mixed up. It's nothing else but energy."

"It's a different kind of energy—the energy of instability. Perhaps he only digests energy of combination."

"You're quibbling," said Mike with disgust. "I say the idea's worth trying."

Paskell shrugged. "Get out your myradyne."

"How long will it take you to fix up a detonator?"

"Twenty minutes. I'll hook up a battery and a spare head-set to the car-tridge. . . ."

WHILE Mike gingerly carried the packet of explosive across the lake, Paskell stood by the port watching. Mike surveyed the landscape with fine calculation, setting down the packet, moving it a few yards to the right,

another few yards toward the delfs. Finally satisfied, he looked back to Paskell for approval. Paskell signaled casually, and his hand fell against the detonation switch. He looked out toward Mike, hastily jumped into his suit, let himself through the port, ran across the lake.

Mike asked, "What's the trouble?"

Paskell said, "That remote control detonator doesn't work. I'd better take a look at it."

Mike stared at him truculently. "How do you know it doesn't work?"

Paskell made a vague gesture, knelt beside the packet, unfolded the wrapping.

"You couldn't have just sensed it," Mike insisted.

"Well, as a matter of fact, my hand accidentally hit the switch, and it didn't go off—so I thought I'd better run out and see what was wrong."

Mike seemed to sink inside his suit. For a moment there was silence. "Ah," said Paskell. "Nothing very serious; I neglected to clip down the battery leads . . . now it's ready to go—"

"I'm going back to the ship," said Mike thickly.

Paskell glanced up toward Sigma Sculptoria. "Yes, there's only a few moments of daylight left. . . ."

Inside the ship, without the booster goggles, night apparently had already come to the quicksilver lake.

Mike reared himself from his bunk where he had been quietly sitting, took his goggles, went up into the control blister. "Nothing in sight."

Paskell said mildly, "Maybe Joe won't be back."

Mike, with his back to Paskell, said nothing.

"Maybe he's been watching us all day," Paskell remarked.

Mike leaned forward. "There's something moving in the gulch . . . there goes the daylight. Blast it! Now I can't see anything. . . . and the dome's in the way of the searchlight again."

In sudden inspiration Paskell said, "Use the radar!"

Milke ran to the screen, flipped some switches, set the key on Green, short range. Paskell swung around the antenna. "Hold it!" said Milke. "Right there!"

Paskell and Milke bent close to the screen. The plane of the lake, the bulk of the mountains, the gap were all clear. Three-legged Joe, much closer, was a blur. "Can't you adjust it finer?" demanded Paskell.

Milke ran to the work bench, came back with a screw-driver, set the Green adjustment to its limit. "How's that?"

"Turn off the lights. I feel like I'm in a peep-show."

"There, any better?"

"Yes, much better."

Milke came back to the screen. Three-legged Joe was a barrel surmounted by a keg. The legs were a blur; flickering wags of light to either side of the trunk seemed to indicate arm-members.

"Look," sighed Milke. "He's stopping by the package."

The great trunk seemed to waver, collapse.

"He's reaching for it."

The shape once more reached its full height.

"He's stopped," said Paskell.

"He's eating the myradyne. . . ."

THREE-LEGGED JOE came forward, and presently blurred out past the resolving power of the set.

The ship jerked tentatively. Milke and Paskell braced themselves. Nothing more. Silence. The radar screen was empty. Paskell switched the antenna. Nothing.

"He's gone," said Milke. "Where's the detonator switch?"

"Wait!" Paskell whispered. He turned on the lights. "Look!"

Milke jerked back. Pressed close to the port beside his face was a rough silvery brown-gray substance.

The port suddenly showed black. A flicker of movement passed the stern port.

"Off with the lights," hissed Milke,

"Back to the radar."

A blur of golden light resolved into an ambling barrel and keg.

"Now," said Milke, "press the button! Quick! Before he gets out of range."

"Just a moment," said Paskell. "Suppose he's smarter than we think?"

"No time for theorizing now," cried Milke. "Where's the button?"

Paskell pushed him away stubbornly. "First we'd better take a look around." He climbed into his space suit while Milke fumed and ranted.

Taking no heed, Paskell left the ship. Out the port Milke could see the glimmer of his head lamp.

The outside port sighed open, throttled shut. Paskell came back into the ship. Milke had his finger on the switch. Paskell, unable to talk through the helmet, banged his glove against the wall. In his other hand he held up a brown packet.

Milke's fingers fell nervously away.

Paskell split himself out of the suit. "I didn't think he'd like myradyne," he said in modest triumph. "The wrong kind of chemical energy. He left it beside the ship."

"God!" said Milke huskily. "Twice on the same day I'm blown to smithereens. . . ."

Paskell carefully removed the detonator. "Every day we're learning more about Three-legged Joe."

Milke's voice was warm with emotion. "Every day we come closer to killing ourselves."

"Tomorrow," said Paskell, "we'll try again."

OVER a cup of hot coffee Milke asked, "How do you mean, try again? So far as I can see, we're hiked. Our guns are no good, he refuses to eat our explosives. Certainly nothing in the world could poison him."

"True." Paskell tamped black slag into his pipe. "The methods for killing human beings don't apply to Three-legged Joe."

"No wonder those old goats at Berlin-

vile gave us the laugh."

Packell puffed thoughtfully. "If we could concentrate enough heat on Joe, for a long enough time—"

"Nuts!" said Mike. "If we had an ocean we couldn't even drown him."

Packell said through the cloud of smoke, "If we melted a puddle in the quicksilver and he fell in, and the quicksilver froze around him—"

"Impossible, Quicksilver at absolute zero is super-conductive. We'd have to heat half the planet."

"Super-conductive... Right. So it is." Packell stared dreamily into the haze. "I wonder how far the quicksilver extends around the planet?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Maybe we'll electrocute Joe."

"Jah!" spat Mike. "With what? Our two thousand-watt generator?"

Packell said, "First we'll have to check on the quicksilver."

"On foot? With Joe pounding along behind us, breathing down our necks?"

Packell said carelessly, "I imagine we can move as fast as Joe."

"I'm not sure. Maybe he runs like a greyhound."

"We'll have our gun."

"Fat lot of good they do."

"Well—I suppose we could take up our ship and cruise around the planet. In fact it might be better. . . ."

His companion had been completely absorbed in his theorizing when Mike called out in alarm, "You're sitting down almost in that ditch!"

"Good," said Packell. "We want to have the ship as near to the gap as possible."

"I don't see why," Mike said petulantly. "In fact I don't understand what you're up to."

"We're planning to electrocute Three-legged Joe," said Packell pettishly. "We've been around the planet; we've established that the quicksilver is interconnected everywhere except at this fifty foot saddle of grey chalk. We've got enough lead and copper aboard to bridge the gap with a fairly heavy cable—

which we will do. We can melt a good connection into the quicksilver with thermite."

"So then?"

"While you're installing the cable, I'll be rigging up some kind of fancy induction coil to take power from our generator and building up watts in the round-planet circuit."

Mike stared incredulously at Packell. "What good will that do?"

"You'll arrange the cable so that when Joe comes along the ditch, he'll have to take hold of the cable to break it. As soon as he does so—he gets everything that we've been feeding into the circuit."

Mike shook his head. "It won't work."

Packell puffed at his pipe. "And why not, pray?"

"Think of the hysteresis in all those miles of quicksilver—the inlets and bays and channels. There'll be a billion little wheels and caddies. . . ."

"There's no energy lost," said Packell. "There's no resistance, so there can't be any production of heat."

"There'll be field conflicts," insisted Mike.

"Only for a few hundredths of a second. After that the fields will necessarily enforce a flow pattern that minimizes the impedance."

Mike shook his head. "I hope you know what you're talking about. . . . But—" he raised a finger—"we've got another problem."

"What's that?"

"The planet's natural magnetism. If we start current flowing around the planet, we're setting up artificial north and south poles. We'll be fighting the natural field."

Packell blinked owlishly. "There is no natural field to this planet. I checked immediately."

Mike threw up his hands. "Go to it, Oliver. It's your party."

MILKE and Packell stood contemplating the ditch, across which, at the height of their eyes, dangled a rude cable. Near the lake, the cable passed

through a long box, from which came leads running to the generator inside the ship.

Paskell said solemnly, "There's a trillion amps running through that cable."

"A few more," said Mike, "it'll swell like a poisoned pup."

"There is a practical limit," admitted Paskell. "At absolute zero the resistance of super-conductive metals is infinitesimal, but still is greater than nothing. When the cable carries a load that generates heat faster than the heat radiates off, the temperature in the cable rises until it reaches the lower limit of super-conductivity."

"And then?"

Paskell flung up his arms. "No more cable."

Mike regarded his handiwork anxiously. "Perhaps we'd better check."

"How? We don't have a thermocouple aboard that sensitive."

Mike shrugged. "All we can do then is hope."

"Right. Hope that Joe comes down that pass before the cable goes." He looked up at the sun. "Still an hour or two of light."

Mike said doubtfully, "The set-up doesn't look very lethal. Suppose Joe grabs the cable and breaks it, and nothing happens—what then?"

"Something's got to happen. We're feeding a constant two thousand watts into that circuit. When Joe breaks the cable those watts have to go somewhere—they just don't evaporate. They keep on going—through Joe. And if Joe doesn't feel it, I'll personally go after him with a pocket-knife."

Mike turned Paskell a surprised glance: strong talk from modest Oliver Paskell.

Paskell was restlessly beating his hands together. "We're forgetting something."

Mike turned, looked toward the ship.

"Ah, yes," said Paskell.

Mike made a strange noise. His arm jerked up.

"The bait," said Paskell. "We want

to set out some acid."

"Never mind the bait," rasped Mike. "We're the bait . . . Joe's behind us. . . ."

Paskell sprang around. Three-legged Joe stood in front of the ship looking at them.

"Run," said Mike. "Up under the cable . . . And if it doesn't work—God help us. . . ."

Three-legged Joe came forward, like a one-legged man on crutches.

Paskell stood frozen. "Run!" screamed Mike. He darted back, seized Paskell's arm.

Paskell broke into a shambling run.

"Faster," panted Mike. "He's gaining on us."

Paskell ran to the mountain side, tried to claw his way up the sheer rock.

"No, no!" yelled Mike. "Through the defile!"

Paskell turned, hunched under one of Joe's arms, scuttled toward the defile.

Mike tackled him. "Under the cable—not through! Under!" He desperately grabbed Paskell's legs, drew him under the cable. Three-legged Joe ambled casually after.

Paskell rose to his feet, looked wildly around. "Easy," said Mike. "Easy. . . ."

Cautiously they backed up the defile. Mike panted, "No use running now. If your contraption doesn't work, we might as well reconcile ourselves to death."

Paskell asked suddenly. "Did you turn on the generator?"

Mike froze. "The generator? Inside the ship? You mean the power out to the circuit?"

"Yes, the generator. . . ."

"No, didn't you?"

"I don't remember."

Mike said despairingly, "You'll know in a minute. Here comes Joe—"

Three-legged Joe paused by the cable. He walked forward. The cable touched his chest. He lifted up his arms. "Close your eyes," cried Paskell.

The sudden glare spattered darts of light through their eyelids.

"You turned on the generator," said Mike.

Three-legged Joe lay forty feet distant, twitching feebly.

"He's not dead," muttered Paskell.

Mike stood looking down at the silver-gray hawk. "We can't cut him up. We can't tie him. We can't. . . ."

Paskell ran to the ship. "Get out the grapples."

RETURNING from the Morfeyville Dead Office, Mike and Paskell stepped into Tom Hand's Chandlery for a new assay tent and a replacement set of reagents.

Lounging at the table were Abel Cooley and his friend James. "Here's the prospectors back from Oddfars," said Cooley.

Tom Hand limped forward. His eyes were red, there was alcohol on his breath, and a series of black and blue bruises showed on one side of his face. "Well, young fellow," he said to Mike in a thick voice, "what'll it be?"

"First, we need a new assay tent."

From the table by the window came a chuckle. James called out in his jocular baritone, "Three-legged Joe maybe tried to bunk in with you?"

Mike made a non-committal gesture; Paskell sucked at his pipe.

Tom Hand said, "Pick up the tent out on the loading platform. What else?"

"We need a set of assay reagents."

Mike handed over a list.

Tom Hand looked at them from under his eyebrows. "You boys still going out prospecting?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"I should think maybe you had a belly-ful."

Mike shrugged. "Oddfars wasn't too bad. We never expected an easy life from prospecting. Joe gave us a pretty hard time, but we took care of him."

Hand leaned forward, red eyes blinking. "What's that?"

"We don't mind letting it out. We've got everything in sight sewed up and recorded."

Abel Cooley said, "You took care of Joe, did you? Talk him to death maybe?"

"No. He's still alive. We've got him where he can't get away. A research team from the Biological Institute is coming out to look him over."

James stepped forward. "You've got him where he can't get away? I've seen Joe break out of a net of two inch cable like it was string. We blasted a mountain down on top of his cave. Twenty minutes later he pushes his way out. . . . Now you tell me you've got him where he can't get away."

"Right," murmured Paskell. "Exactly right."

Mike turned to Tom Hand. "Give us about a hundred gallons of hydrogen peroxide, two hundred gallons of alcohol."

"We've got to keep Joe alive," Paskell told James.

Abel Cooley snorted. "Hogwash."

Tom Hand shrugged, turned away into the recesses of his shop.

James said, in an oil-smooth voice, "Suppose you break down and tell us just what you did to poor old Three-legged Joe."

"Why not?" said Paskell. "But I'm warning you—stay away from him."

"Never mind the jokes. . . . I'm still listening."

"Well, first we electrocuted Joe. It stunned him."

"Yeah?"

"We couldn't kill him or tie him—so while he was still twitching, we threw grapples around his leg, hoisted him twenty miles out into space and gave him an orbit around Oddfars. That's where he is now—alive and well and feeling rather foolish, I should imagine."

James pulled at his chin. He looked at Abel Cooley. "What do you think, Abel?" he asked.

Abel Cooley snorted, looked out the window.

James sat down by the table. "Yes," he said heavily, "Three-legged Joe is feeling rather foolish, I expect."

"About like the rest of you birds," came Tom Hand's voice from behind the shelves.

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Calously, he balanced his head on his arm

No Charge to the Membership

By ROGER DEE

Would you believe a dream—if it came true?

JERRY MACKLIN was pasting a quarter-column India-ink drawing of a Hydra-headed REM into the Page Five mockup of his sometimes-monthly fanzine *Cosmicred*, filling it with palatable care between a hang-over account of *Chico II* and a fanreview roasting the latest issue of (promag) *Stupendous Stories*, when his landlady called him downstairs.

Jerry put his copy of *Space Medicine* across the paste-damp drawing to prevent curling and went down hastily, reluctant to suspend operations on *Cosmicred*—he had made a heroic ef-

fort to accept the fold on the recent startling appearance in Montana of the first genuine Visitors From Space, and as a consequence the issue was already seventeen days late—but even more reluctant to risk eviction by antagonizing Mrs. Bascombe further. In the downstairs parlor, a melancholy cell duffed and antimacassered to a state of specious gentility, he found Mrs. Bascombe holding his visitors at bay.

There were two of them, a man and a girl.

The man was small and bald, with a middle-forties stomach and solemn blue

eyes that blinked neatly behind the shiny place-nose gripping his button nose. The girl was something else again—Jerry retained a giddy impression of melting brown eyes and soft Auburn hair and a figure designed to the most exacting specifications, but the overall effect left him practically blind to details.

"Utg," he said helplessly. Then, feeling the goad of Mrs. Bascombe's intolerant eye: "You wanted to see me?"

"If you are the Jerry Macklin who edits *Considered*," the small man answered, "yea."

They were definitely not bill collectors, since the printer who handled Jerry's photo-offset work had agreed as usual to wait an extra week for his pay. They couldn't be postal inspectors come to ban *Considered* from the mails, either—they didn't have the proper mild-but-merciless look. And besides that, Jerry told himself, *Considered* was solid, as clean as a cat's collar.

They could be reporters, though. Jerry felt his ears burn at the thought; he had been interviewed once before by a glibly sympathetic newshound who promised a favorable press on local science fiction activities, but who subsequently turned out a pulling column devoted entirely to zap-guns and helicopter beamers. . . .

"I am Miriam Dunn," the girl said. "My Brother, Clarence . . . We've come all the way from Cincinnati to meet you, Jerry Macklin—aren't you going to ask us up to see your back files and swap guesses about what the Visitors From Space look like?"

Came the light. They were ten.

"Will comets and neves," Jerry said, "couldn't stop me?"

But when he ushered them upstairs he paused long enough for a diplomatic aside with the stonily delicious Mrs. Bascombe. "This isn't a fan meeting, Mrs. B., just a visit. There won't be any noise, I promise."

Mrs. Bascombe glared suspiciously at the retreating backs but held her peace.

IN HIS room, they held high holiday.

The Duns made appropriate sounds of envy over Jerry's back files of *Considered*, his collector's treasure of long-defunct fanlike greets and his first-edition (autographed) hard-covers by Brown and Leiber. They handled his two-inch telescope with respect, taking due note of its optional forty-, sixty- and hundred-power eyepieces, and they were particularly fascinated by his composite skyscape of Smithsonian star maps that covered the entire west wall.

Until the subject of the Visitors From Space came up, that is; from that moment no other topic was possible.

"For two nights after the ship landed," Jerry admitted without shame, "I didn't sleep a wink for fear I'd miss something. I'd read about this and dreamed of it all these years, and then all of a sudden—bingo, they're here. Just like that they came down in Montana and—"

"And the Army clamped the lid on hot quick," Miriam said. "We've had a zillion second-hand rumors since, but not a glimpse of the Visitors. What do you think they'll look like, Jerry?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Jerry said. He tested the Page Five dummy, found the paste dry enough for handling and passed the sheet around. "This file just came in from Charlie Kocak up in Louisville, who does most of my art work for *Considered*. That's his idea of what the Visitors look like."

The Duns pored over the India-ink BEM, admiring the effect created by its nine fanged heads and its radioactive scales.

"Kocak has a nice eye for detail," said Clarence Dunn. "We stopped off in Louisville to see him on our way down. Neat sketch, this, but of course it can't be accurate."

"The Visitors may even look like us, for that matter," Miriam said. "What do you think they want here, Jerry?"

Jerry shrugged helplessly. "Who knows? I've read a thousand stories that started off just like this, but now

that it's actually happening I can't even guess how it'll end."

"Miriam and I have a theory," Clarence said. He sat on Jerry's chair at the typing table, carefully avoiding the bed with its *Considered* dummies of Pages One through Four, and blinked at Jerry through his pince-nez. "We think that the crew of that Montana ship is made up from dozens of different stellar races, and that all those races are members of a sort of Galactic Union. We think they've come here to invite us to join their Union and that they're busy right now, Army or no Army, canvassing Earth to choose a representative group of humans to make a faster-than-light-speed tour of the galaxy and see what is being offered us."

"Lovely thought," Jerry said, his eyes shining. "Good Lord, what a break for our high-brass astronomers and physicists and—"

"A prime point in our theory," Clarence said, "is that those very authorities are the ones who wouldn't be asked to go, because they'd find the universe out there so different from what they expect that their specialized knowledge would be more a handicap than a help. They'd find that they were no nearer to the actual rudiments of their sciences than any layman in the street, and because of that they'd make poorer observers than laymen. The human mind reaches peak intelligence in its teens—later years make men better able to interpret their environment in terms of experience, but that acquired ability also makes it impossible for them to accept really new and radical concepts. Astronomers and physicists and oceanographers would be barred from the tour because their thought-patterns are too rigidly set. They'd never be able to grasp the actuality of the universe as it really is without going mad."

"Only a very small minority of Earth-people could grasp it," Miriam said. "Poets, for instance, and surrealist painters and science fiction fan. Especially the fan, because they're condi-

tioned to accept anything."

"If I thought you were right," Jerry said, "wild comets and nevae couldn't keep me out of Montana. I'd stow away on that ship if I died in the stowing!"

HE MOVED over to his star maps on the wall, tracing constellation after constellation out through the infinity of space and letting the old wonder and excitement grip him like a band. What was it, he wondered for the thousandth time, that seized on normal human beings and turned them overnight into science fiction fans? It couldn't be the simple lure of novelty or of vicarious adventure—those things could be had here on Earth, without treading to the stars.

There was more to it than that. Much more. . . .

He had formed his picture long ago of what it would be like out there when men finally made the Big Jump. The trackless black pit of space, reaching limitless forever; the giant seas threading their ways through the void in fiery procession, each ringed by its own strange brood of planets; a myriad of worlds waiting, some green and some dead, some just born and still wrapped in their swaddlings of volcanic ashes and flames. . . .

"You won't have to stow away," Clarence Dunn said. "To the initiate, the tour is free. That's why we came here, to invite you to go with us."

Jerry sat down abruptly on the bed, crumpling mockup Pages One through Four of *Considered* beyond all hope of salvage.

"Nuts," he said hollowly. "If you're trying to tell me that you two are Visitors From—"

"You've no dependents or near relatives," Miriam said reasonably. "And you've wished all your life for a chance like this. Why shouldn't you take it now?"

The obvious answer to it all brought to Jerry a conflict of relief and disappointment. It was a rib, of course, a

hoax cooked up between these two and Charlie Koeck in Louisville, and if he had been taken in he'd never hear the last of it. He'd have been laughed right out of fandom.

Clarence and Miriam Dunn looked knowingly at each other.

"The same reaction every time," said Miriam. "How consistent can you get? Isn't it amazing that they should all nurse the same dream, but refuse to believe it when it comes true?"

They turned on Jerry together, curiously, and in spite of his knowledge that it was a hoax he felt his head spin a little.

"Look," Jerry said. "It's a beautiful building, so good that I wish it were true. But when you go back through Louisville you can tell Charlie Koeck that—"

The Duns exchanged another look.

"He doesn't believe us," Miriam said.

"You'll have to show him, Xyptil."

The little man took off his head and balanced it on his knees. Its blue eyes blinked neatly behind their shiny pince-nez, following Jerry's reaction solemnly when he sprang up and kicked over his typing table.

"You see?" Xyptil-Dunn's voice said from his vacant shirt collar. It sounded slightly louder without the obstructing head.

"Xyptil is an Aldebaran," Miriam said.

"From the constellation you call Cygni.

He's a species of crystalline mineral life, a rhombic dodecahedron about the size of a terrestrial orange."

Disenchantment and disillusion all but canceled out Jerry's shock. He stared at Miriam in sudden horror, and flinched when she gave him back a look of impish understanding.

"Wrong again," she said. "Xyptil and I are from different sectors entirely. On my world we're not built like oranges, Jerry Macklin. I'm exactly what I seem."

For proof she tugged at her own shapely head with both hands, and it held fast. She did levitate briefly, however, to a height of three or four feet.

Jerry took a deep breath.

"If you're reading my mind," he said, "you're asking for it. I'll be damned if I'll apologize for what I'm thinking."

She laughed. "You might just possibly find out for yourself, at that. But you'll have competition—half the fan in the world will be along on that tour, and you know how they are."

Xyptil-Dunn settled his head back into his shirt collar and stood up. "We leave early tomorrow morning. I take it you've decided to come with us?"

Jerry went into the bathroom and came back with his razor and toothbrush.

"Why wait till tomorrow?" he said.

"Wind comets and noise. . . ."



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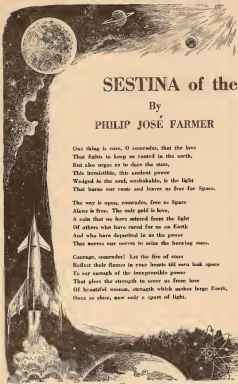
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SESTINA of the

By

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One thing is sure, O comrades, that the love
That fights to keep us rooted in the earth,
But also urges us to chase the stars,
This irresistible, this ancient power
Wedged in the rock, unshakable, is the light
That burns our roots and leaves us free for Space.

The way is open, comrades, free as Space:
Alone is free. The only gold is love,
A coin that we have mined from the light
Of others who have cared for us on Earth
And who have deposited in us the power
That nerves our nerves to seize the burning stars.

Comrade, comrade! Let the fire of stars
Radiate their flames in your hearts till men look space
To say enough of the incalculable power
That gives the strength to save us from love
Of beautiful woman, strength which makes large Earth,
Once so close, now only a speck of light.



SPACE ROCKET

Eyes forward! Sing a psalm to the light
That God gives us to see the distant stars
In eyes that once were blinded with black earth.
Man had no stars for aught but toll, no space
For aught but war. Yet God, in His great love,
Has cleared our eyes and given a hint of Peace.

Now we have lit a candle to the power
Of stars; now we know we're heirs of light
Itself and know no more that flesh whose love
And hates are far from us, as far as stars
Once were, now let us learn to have no space
Unconquered till we find a better earth.

Yes, we hope to seed a new, rich earth.
We hope to breed a race of men whose power
Dwells in hearts as open as all Space
Itself, who ask for nothing less the light
That rises the heart of hate so that the stars
Above will be below when man has Love.

God, Whose hand holds stars, as we jump earth
In our fingers, give us power, give us light
To hold all love within our breast's small space.

Even the Old Professor Could Not Foresee the Past!



I had seen many reproductions, but this was the real thing

BUTTON, BUTTON

IT WAS the tuxedo that fooled me and for two seconds I didn't recognize him. To me, he was just a possible client, the first that had whiffed my way in a week—and he looked beautiful.

Even wearing a tuxedo at 9:45 A.M. he looked beautiful. Six inches of bony

wrist and ten inches of knobby hand continued on where his sleeve left off; the top of his socks and the bottom of his trousers did not quite join forces; still he looked beautiful.

Then I looked at his face and it wasn't a client at all. It was my uncle Otto.

By **ISAAC ASIMOV**

Beauty ended. As usual, my uncle Otto's face looked like a bloodhound that had just been kicked in the rump by his best friend.

I wasn't very original in my reaction. I said, "Uncle Otto?"

You'd know him too, if you saw that face. When he was featured on the cover of *Time* about five years ago (it was either '57 or '58), 264 readers by count wrote in to say that they would never forget that face. Most added comments concerning nightmares. If you want my uncle Otto's full name, it's Otto Schlemmelmayer. But don't jump to conclusions. He's my mother's brother. My own name is Smith.

He said, "Harry, my boy," and groaned.

Interesting, but not enlightening. I said, "Why the tuxedo?"

He said, "It's rented."

"All right. But why do you wear it in the morning?"

"Is it morning already?" He stared vaguely about him, then went to the window and looked out.

That's my uncle Otto Schlemmelmayer.

I assured him it was morning and with an effort he deduced that he must have been walking the city streets all night.

He took a handful of fingers away from his forehead to say, "But I was so upset, Harry. At the banquet—"

The fingers waved about for a minute and then folded into a quart of fist that came down and pounded holes in my desk top. "But it's the end. From now on I do things my own way."

MY UNCLE OTTO had been saying that since the business of the "Schlemmelmayer Effect" first started up. Maybe that surprises you. Maybe you think it was the Schlemmelmayer Effect that made my uncle Otto famous. Well, it's all in how you look at it.

He discovered the Effect back in 1952 and the chances are you know as much about it as I do. In a nutshell, he devised a germanium relay of such a na-

ture as to respond to thoughtwaves, or anyway, to the electro-magnetic fields of the brain cells. He worked for years to build such a delay into a flute, so that it would play music under the pressure of nothing but thought. It was his love, his life, it was to revolutionize music. Everyone would be able to play; no skill necessary—only thought.

Then, five years ago, this young fellow at Consolidated Arms, Stephen Wheeland, modified the Schlemmelmayer Effect and reversed it. He devised a field of supersonic waves that could activate the brain via a germanium relay, fry it, and kill a rat at twenty feet. Also, they found out later, men.

After that, Wheeland got a bonus of ten thousand dollars and a promotion, while the major stockholders of Consolidated Arms proceeded to make millions when the government bought the patents and placed its orders.

My uncle Otto? He made the cover of *Time*.

After that, everyone who was close to him, say within a few miles, knew he had a grievance. Some thought it was the fact he had received no money; others that his great discovery had been made an instrument of war and killing.

Nuts! It was his flute! That was the real tack on the chair of his life. Poor Uncle Otto. He loved his flute. He carried it with him always, ready to demonstrate. It reposed in its special case on the back of his chair when he ate, and at the head of his bed when he slept. Sunday mornings in the University physics laboratories were made hideous by the sounds of my uncle Otto's flute, under imperfect mental control, fluting its way through some tearful German folk song.

The trouble was that no manufacturer would touch it. As soon as its existence was unveiled, the musicians' union threatened to alienate every demi-quaver in the land; the various entertainment industries called its lobbyists to attention and marked them off in brigades for instant action; and even old Pietro Far-

and stuck his baton behind his ear and made fervent statements to the newspapers about the impending death of art. Uncle Otto never recovered.

He was saying, "Yesterday were my final hours. Consolidate informs me they will in my honor a banquet give. Who knows, I say to myself. Maybe they will my flute buy." Under stress, my uncle Otto's word-order tends to shift from English to Germanic.

The picture intrigued me.

"What an idea," I said. "A thousand giant flutes secreted in key spots in enemy territories blaring out stinging commercials just flat enough to—"

"Quiet! Quiet!" My uncle Otto brought down the flat of his hand on my desk like a pistol shot, and the plastic calendar jumped in fright and fell down dead. "From you also mockery? Where is your respect?"

"I'm sorry, uncle Otto."

"Then listen. I attended the banquet and they made speeches about the Schlemmelmayer Effect and how it harnessed the power of mind. Then when I thought they would announce they would my flute buy, they give me this!"

He took out what looked like a two thousand dollar gold-piece and threw it at me. I ducked.

HAD IT hit the window, it would have gone through and brained a pedestrian, but it hit the wall. I picked it up. You could tell by the weight that it was only gold-plated. On one side it said: "The Elias Bancroft Safford Award" in big letters and "to Dr. Otto Schlemmelmayer for his contributions to science" in small letters. On the other side was a profile, obviously not of my uncle Otto. In fact, it didn't look like any breed of dog; more like a pig.

"That," said my uncle Otto, "is Elias Bancroft Safford, chairman of Consolidated Arms!"

He went on, "So when I saw that was all, I got up and very politely, said: 'Gentlemen, dead drop!' and walked out."

"Then you walked the streets all

night," I fitted in for him, "and came here without even changing your clothes. You're still in your tuxedo."

My uncle Otto stretched out an arm and looked at its covering. "A tuxedo?" he said.

"A tuxedo!" I said.

His long, jeweled cheeks turned blotchy red and he roared, "I come here on something of first-rate importance and you insist on about nothing but tuxedos talking. My own nephew!"

I let the fire burn out. My uncle Otto is the brilliant one in the family, so except for trying to keep him from falling into sewers and walking out of windows, we morose try not to bother him.

I said, "And what can I do for you, uncle?"

I tried to make it sound businesslike; I tried to introduce the lawyer-client relationship.

He waited impressively, and said, "I need money."

He had come to the wrong place. I said, "Uncle, right now I don't have—"

"Not from you," he said.

I felt better.

He said, "There is a new Schlemmelmayer Effect; a better one. This one I do not let scientific journals publish. My big mouth shut I keep. It entirely my own is." He was leading a phantom orchestra with his bony fist as he spoke.

"From this new Effect," he went on, "I will make money and my own flute factory open."

"Good," I said, thinking of the factory and lying.

"But I don't know how."

"Bad," I said, thinking of the factory and lying.

"The trouble is my mind is brilliant. I can conceive concepts beyond ordinary people. Only, Harry, I can't conceive ways of making money. It's a talent I do not have."

"Bad," I said, not lying at all.

"So I come to you as a lawyer."

I smuggered a little deprecating snigger.

"I come to you," he went on, "to make

you help me with your crooked, lying, sneaking, dishonest lawyer's brain."

I filed the remark, mentally, under unexpected compliments and said, "I love you, too, uncle Otto."

He must have sensed the sarcasm because he turned purple with rage and yelled, "Don't be touchy. Be like me, patient, understanding, and easygoing, lumphead. Who says anything about you as a man? As a man, you are an honest dunderkopf, but as a lawyer, you have to be a crook. Everyone knows that."

I laughed. The Bar Association warned me there would be days like this.

"What's your new Effect, Uncle Otto?" I asked.

He said, "I can reach back into Time and bring things out of the past."

I acted quickly. With my left hand I snatched my watch out of the lower left vest-pocket and consulted it with all the anxiety I could work up. With my right hand I reached for the telephone.

"Well, Uncle," I said heartily, "I just remembered an extremely important appointment I'm already hours late for. Always glad to see you. And now, I'm afraid I must say good-bye. Yes, sir, seeing you has been a pleasure, a real pleasure. Well, good-bye. Yes, sir—"

I failed to lift the telephone out of its cradle. I was pulling up all right, but my uncle Otto's hand was on mine and pushing down. It was no contest. Have I said my uncle Otto was once on the Heidelberg wrestling team in '32?

He took hold of my elbow gently (for him) and I was standing. It was a great saving of muscular effort (for me).

"Let's," he said, "to my laboratory go."

He to his laboratory went. And since I had neither the knife nor the inclination to cut my left arm off at the shoulder, I to his laboratory went also. . . .

MY UNCLE OTTO'S laboratory is down a corridor and around a corner in one of the university buildings. Ever since the Schlemmelmayer Effect

had turned out to be a big thing, he had been relieved of all course work and left entirely to himself. His laboratory looked it.

I said, "Don't you keep the door locked anymore?"

He looked at me slyly, his huge nose wrinkling into a sniff. "It is locked. With a Schlemmelmayer relay, it's locked. I think a word—and the door opens. Without it, nobody can get in. Not even the President of the University. Not even the janitor."

I got a little excited. "Great guns, Uncle Otto. A thought-lock could bring you—"

"Hah! I should sell the patent for someone else rich to get? After last night? Never. In a while, I will myself rich become."

One thing about my uncle Otto. He's not one of these fellows you have to argue and argue with before you can get him to see the light. You know in advance he'll never see the light.

So I changed the subject. I said, "And the time-machine?"

My uncle Otto is a foot taller than I am, thirty pounds heavier, and strong as an ox. When he puts his hands around my throat and shakes, I have to confine my own part in the conflict to turning blue.

I turned blue accordingly.

He said, "Ssh!"

I got the idea.

He let go and said, "Nobody knows about Project X." He repeated, heavily, "Project X. You understand?"

I nodded. I couldn't speak anyway with a larynx that was only slowly healing.

He said, "I do not ask you to take my word for it. I will for you a demonstration make."

I tried to stay near the door.

He said, "Do you have a piece of paper with your own handwriting on it?"

I fumbled in my inner jacket pocket. I had notes for a possible brief for a possible client on some possible future day.

Uncle Otto said, "Don't show it to me. Just tear it up. In little pieces tear it up and in this beaker the fragments put."

I tore it into one hundred and twenty-eight pieces.

He considered them thoughtfully and began adjusting knots on a—well, on a machine. It had a thick opal-glass slab attached to it that looked like a dentist's tray.

There was a wait. He kept adjusting. Then he said, "Aha!" and I made a sort of queer sound that doesn't translate into letters.

About two inches above the glass tray there was what seemed to be a fuzzy piece of paper. It came into focus while I watched and—oh, well, why make a big thing out of it? It was my notes. My handwriting. Perfectly legible. Perfectly legitimate.

"Is it all right to touch it?" I was a little hoarse, partly out of astonishment and partly because of my uncle Otto's gentle ways of enforcing secrecy.

"You can't," he said, and passed his hand through it. The paper remained behind untouched. He said, "It's only an image at one focus of a four-dimensional paraboloid. The other focus is at a point in time before you tore it up."

I put my hand through it, too. I didn't feel a thing.

"Now watch," he said. He turned a knob on the machine and the image of the paper vanished. Then he took out a pinch of paper from the pile of scrap, dropped them in an ashtray and set a match to it. He flushed the ash down the sink. He turned a knob again and the paper appeared, but with a difference. Ragged patches in it were missing.

"The burned pieces?" I asked.

"Exactly. The machine must trace in time along the hyper-vectors of the molecules on which it is focussed. If certain molecules are in the air dispersed—*poof-f-it!*"

I had an idea. "Suppose you just had the ash of a document?"

"Only those molecules would be traced back."

"But they'd be so well distributed," I pointed out, "that you could get a hazy picture of the entire document."

"Hmm. Maybe."

THE idea became more exciting. "Well, then, look, Uncle Otto. Do you know how much police departments would pay for a machine like this. It would be a boon to the legal—"

I stopped. I didn't like the way he was stiffening. I said, politely, "You were saying, Uncle?"

He was remarkably calm about it. He spoke in scarcely more than a shout. "Once and for all, nephew. All my inventions I will myself free now on develop. First I must some initial capital obtain. Capital from some source other than my ideas selling. After that, I will for my flutes a factory to manufacture open. That comes first. Afterward, afterward, with my profits I can time-vector machinery manufacture. But first my flutes. Before anything, my flutes. Last night, I so swore.

"Through selfishness of a few the world of great music is being deprived. Shall my name in history as a murderer go down? Shall the Schlemmendmayer Effect a way to fry men's brains be? Or shall it beautiful music to mind bring? Great, wonderful, enduring music!"

He had a hand raised oracularly and the other behind his back. The windows gave out a shrill hum as they vibrated to his words.

I said, quickly, "Uncle Otto, they'll hear you."

"Then stop shouting," he retorted.

"But look," I protested, "How do you plan to get your initial capital, if you won't exploit this machinery?"

"I haven't told you. I can make an image real. What if the image is valuable?"

That did sound good. "You mean, like some lost document, manuscript, first edition—things like that?"

"Well, no. There's a catch. Two catches. Three catches."

I waited for him to stop counting, but

three seemed the limit.

"What are they?" I asked.

He said, "First, I must have the object in the present to focus on or I can't locate it in the past."

"You mean you can't get anything that doesn't exist right now where you can see it?"

"Yes."

"In that case, catches two and three are purely academic. But what are they, anyway?"

"I can only remove about a gram of material from the past."

A gram! A thirtieth of an ounce!

"What's the matter? Not enough power?"

My uncle Otto said impatiently, "It's an inverse exponential relationship. All the power in the universe more than maybe two grams couldn't bring."

This left things cloudy. I said, "The third catch?"

"Well," He hesitated, "The farther the two foci separated are, the more flexible the bond. It must a certain length be before into the present it can be drawn. In other words, I must at least one hundred fifty years into the past go."

"I see," I said, (not that I really did). "Let's summarize."

I TRIED to sound like a lawyer. "You want to bring something from the past out of which you can coin a little capital. It's got to be something that exists and which you can see so it can't be a lost object of historical or archaeological value. It's got to weigh less than a thirtieth of an ounce so it can't be the Russian diamond or anything like that. It's got to be at least one hundred and fifty years old, so it can't be a rare stamp."

"Exactly," said my uncle Otto. "You've got it."

Got what? I thought two seconds. "Can't think of a thing," I said. "Well, good-bye, uncle Otto."

I didn't think it would work, but I turned to go.

It didn't work. My uncle Otto's hands came down on my shoulders and I was standing tip-toe on an inch of air.

"You'll wrinkle my jacket, Uncle Otto."

"Harold," he said. "As a lawyer to a client, you owe me more than a quick good-bye."

"I didn't take a retainer," I managed to gurgle. My shirt collar was beginning to fit very tightly about my neck. I tried to swallow and the top button pinged off.

He reasoned, "Between relatives a retainer is a formality. As a client and as an uncle, you owe me absolute loyalty. And besides, if you do not help me out, I will tie your legs behind your neck and dribble you like a basketball."

Well, as a lawyer, I am always susceptible to logic. I said, "I give up. I surrender. You win."

He let me drop.

And then—this is the part that seems most unbelievable to me when I look back at it all—I got an idea.

It was a whole of an idea. A piperon. The one in a lifetime that everyone gets once in a lifetime.

I didn't tell Uncle Otto the whole thing at the time. I wanted a few days to think about it. But I told him what to do. I told him he would have to go to Washington. It wasn't easy to argue him into it, but, on the other hand, if you know my uncle Otto, there are ways.

I found two ten dollar bills lurking pitifully in my wallet and gave them to him.

I said, "I'll make out a check for the train-fare and you can keep the two tens if it turns out I'm being dishonest with you."

He considered. "A fool to risk twenty dollars for nothing you aren't," he admitted.

He was right, too. . . .

HE WAS back in two days and pronounced the object focussed. After all it was on public view. It's in a nitrogen-filled, air-tight case, but my uncle Otto said that didn't matter. And back

in the laboratory, four hundred miles away, the focussing remained accurate. My uncle Otto assured me of that, too.

I said, "Two things, uncle Otto, before we do anything."

"What? What? What?" He went on at greater length, "What? What? What? What?"

I gathered he was growing anxious. I said, "Are you sure that if we bring into the present a piece of something out of the past, that piece won't disappear out of the object as it now exists?"

My uncle Otto cracked his large knuckles and said, "We are creating new matter, not stealing old. Why else should we enormous energy need?"

I passed on to the second point. "What about my fee?"

You may not believe this, but I hadn't mentioned money till then. My uncle Otto hadn't either, but then, that follows.

His mouth stretched in a bad imitation of an affectionate smile. "A fee?"

"Ten percent of the take," I explained, "is what I'll need."

His jaws drooped, "But how much is the take?"

"Maybe a hundred thousand dollars. That would leave you ninety."

"Ninety thousand—*Stimmt!* Then why do we wait?"

He leaped at his machine and in half a minute the space above the dentist's tray was aglow with an image of parchment.

It was covered with neat script, closely spaced, looking like an entry for an old-fashioned penmanship prize. At the bottom of the sheet there were names: one large one and fifty-five small ones.

"Funny thing!" I choked up. I had seen many reproductions, but this was the real thing. The real Declaration of Independence!

I said, "I'll be damned. You did it."

"And the hundred thousand?" asked my uncle Otto, getting to the point.

Now was the time to explain. "You see, uncle, at the bottom of the document there are signatures. These are the

names of great Americans, fathers of their country, whom we all revere. Anything about them is of interest to all true Americans."

"All right," grumbled my uncle Otto, "I will accompany you playing 'The Stars and Stripes Forever' on my flute."

I laughed quickly to show that I took that remark as a joke. The alternative to a joke would not bear thinking of. Have you ever heard my uncle Otto playing "The Stars and Stripes Forever" on his flute?

I said, "But one of these signers, from the state of Georgia, died in 1777, the year after he signed the Declaration. He didn't leave much behind him and so authentic examples of his signature are about the most valuable in the world. His name was Button Gwinnett."

"And how does this help us cash in?" asked my uncle Otto, his mind still fixed grimly on the eternal verities of the universe.

"Here," I said, simply, "is an authentic real-life signature of Button Gwinnett, right on the Declaration of Independence."

My uncle Otto was stunned into absolute silence, and to bring absolute silence out of my uncle Otto, he's really got to be stunned!

I said, "Now you see him right here on the extreme left of the signature space along with the two other signers for Georgia, Lyman Hall and George Walton. You'll notice they crowded their names although there's plenty of room above and below. In fact, the capital G of Gwinnett runs down into practical contact with Hall's name. So we won't try to separate them. We'll get them all. Can you handle that?"

Have you ever seen a happy bloodhound? Well, my uncle Otto managed to look like one.

A spot of brighter light centered about the names of the three Georgian signers.

Uncle Otto said, a little breathlessly, "I have this never tried before."

"What?" I screamed. Now he told me.

"It would have too much energy re-

quired. I did not wish the University to inquire what was in here going on. But don't worry! My mathematics cannot wrong be."

I prayed silently that his mathematics not wrong were.

The light grew brighter and there was a humming that filled the laboratory with raucous noise. My uncle Otto turned a knob, then another, then a third.

DO YOU remember the time a few weeks back when all of upper Manhattan and the Bronx were without electricity for twelve hours because of the damndest overload cut-off in the main power-house. I won't say we did that, because I am in no mood to be sued for damages. But I will say this. The electricity went off when my uncle Otto turned the third knob.

Inside the lab, all the lights went out and I found myself on the floor with a terrific ringing in my ears. My uncle Otto was sprawled across me.

We worked each other to our feet and my uncle Otto found a flashlight.

He bowed his anguish. "Fused, Fused. My machine in ruins is. It has to destruction devoted been."

"But the signatures?" I yelled at him. "Did you get them?"

He stopped in mid-cry. "I haven't looked."

He looked, and I closed my eyes. The disappearance of a hundred thousand dollars is not an easy thing to watch.

He cried, "A-ha!" and I opened my eyes quickly. He had a square of parchment in his hand some two inches on a side. It had three signatures on it and the top one was that of Button Gwinnett.

Now, mind you, the signature was absolutely genuine. It was no fake. There wasn't an atom of fraud about the whole transaction. I want that understood. Lying right there on my uncle Otto's broad hand was a signature indited with the Georgian hand of Button Gwinnett himself on the authentic parchment

of the honest-to-God, real-life Declaration of Independence!

It was forthwith decided that my uncle Otto would travel down to Washington with the parchment scrap. I was unsatisfactory for the purpose. I was a lawyer. I would be expected to know too much. He was merely a scientific genius, and wasn't expected to know anything. Besides, who could suspect Dr. Otto Schlemmelmayer of anything but the most transparent honesty.

We spent a week arranging our story. I bought a book for the occasion in a second-hand shop—an old history of colonial Georgia. My uncle Otto was to take it with him and claim he had found a document among its leaves; a letter to the Continental Congress in the name of the State of Georgia. He had shrugged his shoulders at it and held it out over a Hansen flame. Why should a physicist be interested in letters? Then he became aware of the peculiar odor it gave off as it burned and the slowness with which it was consumed. He beat out the flames but saved only the piece with the signatures. He looked at it and the name Button Gwinnett had started a slight fiber of memory.

He had the story told. I burnt the edges of the parchment so that the lowest name, that of George Walton, was slightly staged.

"It will make it more realistic," I explained. "Of course, a signature, without a letter above it, loses value, but here we have three signatures, all signers."

My uncle Otto was thoughtful. "And if they compare the signatures with those on the Declaration and notice it is all even microscopically the same. Won't they fraud suspect?"

"Certainly. But what can they do? The parchment is authentic. The ink is authentic. The signatures are authentic. They'll have to concede that. No matter how they suspect something queer they can't prove anything. Can they conceive reaching through time for it? In fact, I hope they do try to make a fax. The publicity will boost the price."

The last phrase made my uncle Otto laugh.

The next day he took the train to Washington with visions of flutes in his head. Long flutes, short flutes, bass flutes, flute tremolos, massive flutes, more flutes, flutes for the individual and flutes for the orchestra. A world of flutes for mind-drawn music.

"Remember," his last words were, "the machine I have no money to rebuild. This must work."

And I said, "Uncle Otto, it can't miss."

Ha!

HE WAS back in a week. I had made long-distance calls each day and each day he told me they were investigating.

Investigating.

Well, wouldn't you investigate? But what good would it do them?

I was at the station waiting for him. He was expressionless. I didn't dare ask anything in public. I wanted to say, "Well, yes or no?" but I thought, let him speak.

I took him to my office. I offered him a cigar and a drink. I hid my hands under the desk but that only made the desk shake too, so I put them in my pocket and shook all over.

He said, "They investigated."

"Sure! I told you they would. Ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha!"

My uncle Otto took a slow drag at the cigar. He said, "The man at the Bureau of Documents came to me and said, 'Professor Schlemmelmeyer,' he said, 'you are the victim of a clever fraud.' I said, 'So? And how can it a fraud be? The

signature a forgery is?' So he answered, 'It certainly doesn't look like a forgery, but it must be!' 'And why must it be?' I asked."

My uncle Otto put down his cigar, put down his drink and leaned across the desk toward me. He had me so in suspense, I leaned forward toward him, so in a way I deserved everything I got.

"Exactly," I babbled, "why must it be? They can't prove a thing wrong with it, because it's genuine. Why must it be a fraud, eh? Why?"

My uncle Otto's voice was terrifyingly anechoic. He said, "We got the parchment from the past?"

"Yes. Yes. You know we did."

"Well in the past."

"Over a hundred fifty years in the past. You said—"

"And a hundred fifty years ago the parchment on which the Declaration of Independence was written pretty new was. No?"

I was beginning to get it, but not fast enough.

My uncle Otto's voice switched gears and became a dull, throbbing roar, "And if Britton Gwynett in 1777 died, you Godforsaken, dunderlump, how can an authentic signature of his on a new piece of parchment be found?"

After that it was just a case of the whole world rushing backward and forward about me.

I expect to be on my feet soon. I still ache, but the doctors tell me no bones were broken.

Still, my uncle Otto didn't have to make me swallow the damned parchment.





Who's Cribbing ?

By JACK LEWIS

April 2, 1958

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-28 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Lewis:

We are returning your manuscript **THE NINTH DIMENSION**. At first glance, I had figured it a story well worthy of publication. Why couldn't I? So did the editors of **Comic Tales** back in 1934 when the story was first published.

As you no doubt know, it was the great **Tedd Thromberry** who wrote the story you tried to pass off on us as an original. Let me give you a word of caution concerning the penalties resulting from plagiarism.

It's not worth it. Believe me.

Sincerely,

Doyle P. Gates
Science Fiction Editor
Deep Space Magazine

STARTLING STORIES

April 6, 1952

Mr. Doyle P. Gates
Editor, Deep Space Magazine
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Gates:

I do not know, nor am I aware of the existence of any Todd Thresherry. The story you rejected was submitted in good faith, and I resent the inference that I plagiarized it.

THE NINTH DIMENSION was written by me not more than a month ago, and if there is any similarity between it and the story written by this Thresherry person, it is purely coincidental.

However, it has set me thinking. Some time ago, I submitted another story to Stardust Scientifiction, and received a pencilled notation on the rejection slip stating that the story was, "too thresherryish".

Who in the hell is Todd Thresherry? I don't remember reading anything written by him in the ten years I've been interested in science fiction.

Sincerely,

Jack Lewis

April 11, 1952

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-25 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Lewis:

Re: Your letter of April 5.

While the editors of this magazine are not in the habit of making open accusations and are well aware of the fact in the writing business there will always be some overlapping of plot ideas, it is very hard for us to believe that you are not familiar with the works of Todd Thresherry.

While Mr. Thresherry is no longer among us, his works, like so many other writers', only became widely recognized after his death in 1941. Perhaps it was his work in the field of electronics that supplied him with the bottomless pit of new ideas so apparent in all his works. Nevertheless, even at this stage of science fiction's development it is apparent that he had a style that many of our so called contemporary writers might do well to copy. By "copy," I do not mean rewrite word for word one or more of his works, as you have done. For while you state this has been accidental, surely you must realize that the chance of this phenomenon actually happening is about a million times as great as the occurrence of four pot royal flushes on one deal.

Sorry, but we're not that naive.

Sincerely yours,

Doyle P. Gates
Science Fiction Editor
Deep Space Magazine

April 14, 1952

Mr. Doyle P. Gates
Editor, Deep Space Magazine
New York, N.Y.

Sir:

Your accusations are typical of the rag you publish.

Please cancel my subscription immediately.

Sincerely,

Jack Lewis

April 14, 1952

Science Fiction Society
144 Front Street
Chicago, Ill.

Gentlemen:

I am interested in reading

some of the works of the late
Tedd Thromberry.

I would like to get some of
the publications that feature
his stories.

Respectfully,
Jack Lewis

April 23, 1932

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-28 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Lewis:

We would be. All I can
suggest is that you contact
the publishers if any are still
in business, or haunt your
second hand bookstores.

If you succeed in getting
any of these magazines, please
let us know. We'll pay you a
handsome premium on them.

Yours,
Ray Albert
President,
Science Fiction Society

May 11, 1932

Mr. Sampson J. Gross, Editor
Strange Worlds Magazine
St. Louis, Mo.

Dear Mr. Gross:

I am enclosing the manuscript
of a story I have just
completed. As you see on the
title page, I call it **WRECKERS
OF TEN MILLION GALAXIES**. Be-
cause of the great amount of
research that went into it, I
want set the minimum price on
this one at not less than two
cents a word.

Hoping you will see fit to
use it for publication in your
magazine, I remain,

Respectfully,
Jack Lewis

May 13, 1932

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-28 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Lewis:

I'm sorry, but at the present
time we won't be able to use
**WRECKERS OF TEN MILLION
GALAXIES**. It's a great yarn
though, and if at some future
date we decide to use it we
will make out the reprint
check directly to the estate
of Tedd Thromberry.

That boy sure could write.

Cordially,
Sampson J. Gross
Editor,
Strange Worlds Magazine

May 23, 1932

Mr. Doyle P. Gates
Editor, Deep Space Magazine
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Gates:

While I said I would never
have any dealings with you or
your magazine again, a
situation has arisen which is
most puzzling.

It seems all my stories are
being returned to me by reason
of the fact that except for
the byline, they are exact
duplicates of the works of
this Tedd Thromberry person.

In your last letter you
aptly described the odds on
the accidental occurrence of
this phenomenon in the case of
one story. What would you
consider the approximate odds
on no less than half a dozen
of my writings?

I agree with you--astronomical!

Yet in the interest of all
mankind, how can I get the
idea across to you that every

June 3, 1952

word I have submitted was actually written by me: I have never copied any material from Todd Thromberry, nor have I ever seen any of his writings. In fact, as I told you in one of my letters, up until a short while ago I was totally unaware of his very existence.

An idea has occurred to me however. It's a truly weird theory, and one that I probably wouldn't even suggest to anyone but a science fiction editor. But suppose—just suppose—that this Thromberry person, what with his experiments in electronics and everything, had in some way managed to crack through this time-space barrier mentioned so often in your magazine. And suppose—egotistical as it sounds—he had singled out my work as being the type of material he had always wanted to write.

Do you begin to follow me? Or is the idea of a person from a different time cycle looking over my shoulder while I write, too fantastic for you to accept?

Please write and tell me what you think of my theory?
Respectfully,
Jack Lewis

May 25, 1952

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-26 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.
Dear Mr. Lewis:

We think you should consult a psychiatrist.

Sincerely,
Doyle P. Gates
Science Fiction Editor
Deep Space Magazine

Mr. Sam Mines
Science Fiction Editor
Standard Magazines Inc.
New York, 16, N.Y.
Dear Mr. Mines:

While the enclosed is not really a manuscript at all, I am submitting this series of letters, carbon copies, and correspondence, in the hope that you might give some credulity to this seemingly-unbelievable happening.

The enclosed letters are all in proper order and should be self-explanatory. Perhaps if you publish them, some of your readers might have some idea how this phenomenon could be explained.

I call the entire piece
WHO'S CRIBBING.

Respectfully,
Jack Lewis

June 10, 1952

Mr. Jack Lewis
90-26 219 St.
Queens Village, N.Y.
Dear Mr. Lewis:

Your idea of a series of letters to put across a science fiction idea is an intriguing one, but I'm afraid it doesn't quite come off.

It was in the August 1940 issue of *MACABRE ADVENTURES* that Mr. Thromberry first used this very idea. Ironically enough, the story title also was: *WHO'S CRIBBING*.

Feel free to contact me again when you have something more original.

Yours,
Samuel Mines
Science Fiction Editor
Standard Magazines Inc.

"Two weeks ago I brought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won \$25.00. Please send me more." R.C. Tredegar, B. Wales
—Answer from "Everybody's Favorite Book" 1911

JOAN THE WAD

is the Lucky Cornish Piskey

who Sees All, Hears All, Does All.

JOAN THE WAD is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskey. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that Joan the Wad has brought them as Wonderful Luck on the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.

HISTORY FREE FOR A STAMP

If you will send me your name and address, a postage and a stamped addressed envelope for reply, I will send you a history of the Cornish Piskey Folk, and the marvellous stories of their wonderful JOAN THE WAD is the QUEEN of the Lucky Cornish Piskey, and with whom good luck and health always abound.

AS HEALER.

One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep over her she is much better." Do you think this is due to Joan or the Water from the Holy Well?

AS MATCHMAKER.

A young girl writes and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had started Cornish and taken Joan the Wad that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has Joan the Wad.

AS SPECULATOR.

A man writes: "I had some shares that the market kept a capital's own away. They were at a loss and all of a sudden they were up in the market in 10s. I happened to be sitting at Joan the Wad. Next morning, when they got, but I thought I was too late which apparently I was not, having the money at present profit and have prospered ever since."

AS LUCK BRINGER.

Another writes: "Since the Wad my wife and I have been blessed by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be walking down and down. Day after tomorrow we got a Joan the Wad, the lady never found out who it was, but coincidence of you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left too. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, never for." Queen Jane.

AS PROTECTOR.

A young man, wrote as only last week: "For two years I started correspondence with you, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful at least. I have got ways of my peace, but I know that———, who was always a competitor, has not because I got JOAN THE WAD. When by now he knows he has lost a lot of money, as you see I have come to them." Queen Jane.

JOAN THE WAD'S achievements are unique. Never before was such a record placed before the Public. Ask yourself if you have ever heard of anything so stupendous. You have not. Results are what count, and these few letters from satisfied letters are a record of the many thousands that are content, and from which are sent public acknowledgments from time to time. We unhesitatingly GUARANTEE that these letters were photographically reproduced, and the originals are open to inspection at JOAN'S COTTAGE. Read of more of the full information about this FAVORITE Luck Bringer. Yes, too, may benefit in Health, Wealth and Happiness in an amazing degree.

"SUNDAY GRAPHIC" PICTURE PUZZLE.

No. 197.—"I have been the Wad, I received this puzzle from the Graphic No. 197, the first of the Joan the Wad in the 'Sunday Graphic' Picture Puzzle. I have been busy solving letters, but you have brought me just the letter I wanted."—F. T. Salisbury.

WON £25. 0/6, THEN £25. 0/6.

No. 196.—"Genuine account of luck... since winning the Joan the Wad... I was successful in winning £25. 0/6 in the 'Puzzle' Reward No. 197 and also the 'News of the World' Reward No. 197. I got 100. 0/6. I got 10. 0/6 in the 'Graphic' puzzle, which is contained in Joan the Wad. I got 10. 0/6 in the 'Graphic' puzzle."—A. W. Lambington N.Y.

WINNERS OF £5. 10. 0.

No. 195.—"My father, myself and my sister had the pleasure of solving a Cornish Piskey in the 'Sunday Graphic' puzzle which came in No. 197, which we put down to JOAN THE WAD, and we think very much of it."—A. W. Lambington.

WON PRIZE OF £5. 10. 0.

No. 194.—"Arrived at home alone, followed the very next day by the satisfaction that I had won a prize of £5. 10. 0. in a Literary Competition."—F. R. Lambington.

"DAILY HERALD" PICTURE PUZZLE.

No. 193.—"Since having received JOAN THE WAD, I received eleven, past three in the 'Daily Herald' Picture Puzzle, £5. 10. 0."—M. F. Northall.

25 you have to do it in and a 10 stamp (Stamp Stamp wrapped) and a stamped addressed envelope for the history in 60, JOAN'S COTTAGE, LANIVET, BODMIN, CORNWALL.

For Canada and U.S.A., send 10 cents for History, or 25 for both History and Magic.

For Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Rhodesia, Barbados and other Colonies, send 10. 0/6 for History, or 25. 0/6 for both History and Magic.

JOAN WINNER.

No. 192.—"Mrs. A. J. of Lambington, has just won 10. 0/6 and sent the Joan the WAD, in please send me it."—Mrs. V. Bromley.

FIRST PRIZE "NIGHTS."

No. 191.—"I have had my good luck since receiving JOAN THE WAD. I have won First Prize in 'NIGHTS' 'Nights'." I had JOAN THE WAD in 'Nights' and I have been lucky ever since."—Mrs. N. W. Lambington.

WON "DAILY MIRROR" HAMPER.

No. 190.—"I have just had my first gift since having JOAN THE WAD, which was a 'DAILY MIRROR' HAMPER."—S. M. F. Bromley.

WON "NIGHTS" £25.

No. 189.—"My husband is a very generous in 'Nights' and 'Nights'." He had my first luck and I gave him JOAN THE WAD, when the first week he received a considerable sum in 'Nights' and last week FIRST Prize in 'Nights' £25."—Mrs. A. J. Lambington.

CAN ANYONE BEAT THAT?

No. 188.—"Immediately after receiving my JOAN THE WAD I won a 1st Prize in a local Derby Sweep, then I was given a hamper after seven months of waiting and finally had a complete success in 'Nights' Prize' £25 in 'Nights' and I have been lucky ever since."—W. M. Lambington, C.A.

POST THIS COUPON AND LET ME SHOW YOU HOW TO BECOME A NEW MAN

How do you feel when people notice your physique? Can you stand their gaze? If you're not satisfied with your present physical development, let me PROVE I can make you a New Man—in only 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home. I'll broaden your shoulders, add ridges of solid muscle to your stomach, fill out your arms and legs. If you are fat and feeble, I'll transform you into a picture of robust manhood.

WHAT 'DYNAMIC-TENSION' CAN DO

How? 'Dynamic-Tension.' That's the secret that changed me from a feeble-chested 7-stone weakling into the red-blooded, BIL-MAN that I am to-day. That's how I'm turning thousands of fellows like yourself into New Men—with brawny, masculine body and endless endurance. I can do the same for you. Let me PROVE it!

'Dynamic-Tension' is a PRACTICAL and NATURAL method. You use no apparatus. My method actually is FUN! In only 15 minutes a day, you will actually see your muscles increase into powerful bridges of brawn and strength. You'll enjoy new stamina, a glad-to-be-alive feeling. Before you know it, you'll have a rugged, handsome body, a tough-and-ready endurance surpassing that of any man the world can't lick. I'll show you how it really feels to LIVE!



MY HANDS BOOK
**NOT 5/-
NOT 2/6
but FREE**

Post this coupon NOW for my illustrated FREE book "You Can Be A New Man." I show exact photos of pupils for changed form, revealing extra remarkable specimens of muscularity. If you want a body that your respect and women admire, then get the coupon into the post as fast as you can. (Address: Charles Atlas, (Box 147-V), 1, Dean Street, London, W 1.)



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Atlas*

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Physique
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MUSCLES GROW DAY BY DAY

"It is most extraordinary with your system to usually get one's muscles grow day by day."
L. J. H. (Birmingham)

GREAT FEAT OF STRENGTH

"I have passed 140 lb. in unassisted weight, and can lift up to 250 lb. one clear from the ground."
W. M. M. (Birmingham)

WONDERFUL RESULTS

"Now feel a different man—full of pep, courage, vitality and strength."
L. C. (North Africa)

CHARLES ATLAS

(Box 147-V), 1, Dean Street, London, W 1.

I want the good that your system of 'Dynamic-Tension' will make a New Man of me! give me a healthy, brawny body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE Book. You Can Be a New Man and details of your famous 7-day TRIAL OFFER.

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